

DYING HIGH

Having shown in *Derry Down Death* a talent for writing an ingenious detective story with an original theme, Avon Curry again departs from the beaten track to tell the mysterious story of the death of a glider pilot. Unusual background and good solution!

By the same author

DERRY DOWN DEATH

AVON CURRY

Dying High



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The gliding club portrayed in this book is entirely imaginary and so are the characters. I shouldn't like to think that the non-gliding reader might believe that murder, jealousy and violence are commonplace among the gliding fraternity, although Romance (with a capital R) is rife.

I hope this book will help to pass the time when the sailplanes are grounded.

My thanks are due to the British Gliding Association and to the London Gliding Club, especially to Ray Stafford Allen, "Wheaty," Bill and last but not least, Liz.

The late John Westhorpe discussed the plot of this book with me and verified all the details. His tragic death this year robbed British gliding of one of its finest pilots.

ONE

A BOOKSHOP has two main streams of customers. There are those who come in, ask for a book, slap down the money, and go out; from this group the bookseller makes his living. There are also those who come in at 9.10 a.m., browse happily until 12.30, lay out sixpence on something from the junk box, and leave a bookmark in a six guinea volume so as to know where to start reading again tomorrow; from this group the bookseller gets his entertainment and sometimes his friends.

A particularly attractive girl had been coming into Jerome Aylwin's shop in the Charing Cross Road for nearly a fortnight. The moment she put in her first appearance she stamped herself "browser" by waving aside assistance with the wellknown phrase, "I'm just looking around." Yet she didn't seem quite the type. Browsers are usually absent-minded, other-worldly, not given to bothering overmuch about dandruff on the shoulders or clean shoes. But this girl was tidy; her clothes, though not exactly chic, had been bought recently, were of good quality, and received attention. And the perfume of her rather inexpertly applied make-up was expensive. Nineteen years old, maybe, or an unsophisticated twenty. Well kept hands, which had known the services of a professional manicurist. A good hairstyle—not exaggerated and not in the height of fashion, ~~but~~ well cut and well cared for.

She was a puzzle, all right. She came in every day, hung around for thirty minutes or an hour, sometimes reading but more often than not peering covertly at Jerome over the top of the book she held.

"It's you she's interested in, old boy, not the stock," Joe Vanning, Jerome's partner, said with a leer. "Lucky you.

She's all right as to shape and size and age, and you can maybe discourage her from wearing black, which is a mistake with her skin."

"Does it strike you she looks unhappy?" Jerome ventured.

"Oui, oui, elle est triste," interposed Hélène, the latest of the line of foreign students acting as shop assistant.

"It's that black coat. I wonder where she bought it? And why? Only warm-complexioned women should wear black, or else dramatic brunettes—and she's neither."

"She may have bought it as mourning."

"In that case she's sizing you up to see if you'll fill the gap left by the dear departed. Now why you?" Joe said wonderingly.

It was a tempting notion to Jerome, for he was currently nursing a broken heart. The young woman whom he'd confidently expected to marry had deserted him in favour of a generous scholarship to study music at the University College of Los Angeles, California, U.S.A., which was as about as far away as the circumference of the earth would allow. He ought to have taken the next plane and brought Ellen back, or at least, if she refused to come home, married her out of hand in front of one of those laconic American J.P.'s. Unfortunately, at the time Ellen left for California Jerome was waiting to be called as chief witness for the prosecution in a murder trial; he had to argue his own case with Ellen by airmail, cable, and transatlantic telephone. Perhaps the poignancy of his plea was blunted by the distance, but whatever the reason Ellen stayed where she was and didn't even reply to the last two cables.

Now here he was, lonely, available, and as always, very susceptible. And here was this nice brown-haired girl with a skin which was chilled to a cold wintry white by the black clothes she wore, and with brown eyes which, when caught studying him, would fill with a charming distress.

She worried him. She unnerved him. If she had been like some of the others who came in to stare at him after the Westerhalton murder trial, he would have either ignored her or scared her off by pressuring her into buying a rare book of hideous woodcuts for twenty guineas. But she looked shy and, as Helene said, "triste" He couldn't be unkind to her.

All the same, he would give her two more days. And if by Thursday she had not declared her interest, he would tackle her.

Thursday came, but not the black-clad girl. She generally showed up just after lunch, but there was no sign of her by three. And then, just as Jerome was telling himself with relief that he was rid of her, there she was in the doorway. She skirted the centre display of this month's "interest books": "Kenneth Grahame, born March 1859—First Editions—Critical Appraisals." "Pax Cakes, Doling Day, Oranges and Lemons Ceremony—A Large Selection of Books on Old English Customs." She paused and picked up a copy of "The Wind in The Willows" but he knew perfectly well she wouldn't buy it. Finally she retired to her favourite corner—"British Geographers and Oceanographers, 1550-1900." The time was ten minutes to five in the afternoon.

There was the usual small rush of business from home-going city workers. By the time ne thought of her again Joe was locking the cabinet of Georgian and Victorian prints and Hélène was putting on her coat.

The girl in black was still there, just slipping "The Report of H.M.S. Challenger" back into its place on the shelf. Now was as good a time as any.

He advanced upon her with determination. As he opened his mouth to say "Is there a book I could show you?" she got in first.

"Will you have dinner with me?"

He discovered that his mouth was still open, and shut it. Then he swallowed and said, with a rueful grin on his unimpressive countenance, "If anyone speaks that line surely it should be me?"

"No, because you haven't the slightest reason for wanting to get to know me—"

"But indeed I have—"

"Please!" She waved that aside impatiently. "Don't let's play any silly games. I want to talk to you about something serious. That's why I've been coming here, to see what sort of a person you were—"

"Me?"

She nodded.

"But why?"

"I need your help. I need someone with particular qualifications and I wanted to see if what I'd read about you—"

"Read about me?" His heart sank. The Westerhalton murder case. She was another sensation seeker after all. "You mean the newspapers, of course."

"I was tremendously impressed by the evidence you gave at the Assizes."

"You shouldn't take it too seriously. Don't forget reporters like a good 'angle' on a story. I happened to be the angle, that's all."

"No, that's not true, because Daddy said the same and that's why I remembered your name—because Daddy spoke so favourably." Clearly she thought she was conferring an accolade for seeing him look merely polite she was puzzled for a moment and then added, "My father's Vivian Haskell."

Vivian Haskell—it appeared in big blue lettering on yellow bulldozers and cement mixers and road-minders' huts all over the country. "The construction company?"

"He owns it. My name's Barbara Haskell. In case you

think I'm a spoiled neurotic rich girl maybe I ought to say I'm reading economics at London University—not that it proves I'm unspoiled or anything." She smiled timidly. "I've never asked a man to dinner before—one I don't know, I mean."

"It's a new experience for me too."

"You're not angry? And you'll come? I've been nerving myself to ask you and today I actually ordered the food so that I'd have to go through with it."

"But why me?" he persisted.

"Because you can find out things, and that's what I need. Someone who—"

"You need a private detective, perhaps. I'm a bookseller."

"But not just an ordinary bookseller. Besides, I've had a good look at you and I believe you'd be ideal for the job. A private detective would perhaps worry and snap at the problem like a dog at a rathole, and put everybody on their guard. But not you."

"That's it in a nutshell, Miss Haskell. Definitely not me. I'm too busy tending the store."

"I—I would pay you for any losses your absence might cause. And anything else you liked to ask as a fee."

"Miss Haskell, I was involved in the Westerhalton affair because one of my best and oldest friends was killed and it was up to me to find out who was responsible."

"I have reasons just as good for asking your help," she countered, and she looked steadily at him although she was going slowly scarlet.

"A close friend—?"

"My lover," she replied.

TWO

WHEN a shy and obviously well brought up young lady nerves herself to such a declaration, you can't just shrug it off. Therefore at seven o'clock that evening Jerome finished , tying his black bow and rang for a taxi. It was a beastly evening, the proverbial lion of the end of March giving a final lash of its tail before giving place to April. Biting rain smacked Jerome in the face even between the door of the taxi and the door of the palatial block of flats. But the Haskells' place was comforting; warm, softly lit, and full of spring flowers whose arrangement was as expensive as their perfection. They gave out a sweet heady scent which added yet another confusion to a mind already somewhat dazed by the magnificence of a carpet like six-inch-thick marsh-mallow, genuine Renoirs on the wall, and a hundred yards of gold satin curtaining.

"Daddy's away at present," Barbara remarked as she led the way into the drawing room. Whereat he felt a pang of mingled hope and uncertainty. Was it after all only a silly undergrad prank? And was he being had for a damned fool?

But then an elderly housekeeper of a frigid respectability came in with a tray of drinks and scolded Miss Barbara for spilling face powder on her dressing table. And, annoyingly, he didn't know whether he was glad or sorry that quite clearly it was no prank.

The dinner was excellent. The housekeeper beamed on him for his unconcealed pleasure in the food. But nothing except general conversation seemed permissible in her presence. She left them finally after arranging coffee on a table in front of the log fire crackling, quite unnecessarily in face of the central heating, in the drawing room.

Barbara poured the hot black brew smelling unmistakably of Mocha. "Cream? Sugar?"

"No thanks. Stop fidgeting. Take the plunge before you have time to get embarrassed."

She said slowly, "Did you happen to see in the papers about three weeks ago that there had been a gliding accident?"

"A what? I beg your pardon, I didn't catch—?"

"A gliding accident. Don't say," she broke out in exasperation, "that you've never heard of gliding!"

"I had a friend who was in the Glider Regiment," he said pacifically. "You get towed along behind a plane and then cast loose, and then you float about, without visible means of support until at last the wind lets you down—literally."

"It's not quite like that. But you've a better notion of it than some folk I've met. One dear old lady thought it had something to do with winter sports, I don't know why. And when I told her it was flight without an aero-engine, she thought I was talking about ballooning—like Montgolfier."

"Well, I'm a little ahead of your dear old lady. I know you have to have a contraption cunningly shaped to look like an aeroplane, only it isn't. And it doesn't have a motor so it needs a good gale of wind to get it along—"

"It doesn't," she interrupted. "But never mind that for the moment. Richard Denver was a pilot with a Diamond as well as a Gold C—"

"Wait a minute. Don't look cross. It's no good unless I get the gist. Diamond and Gold C—this mean excellence, I take it?"

"They didn't come any better," she said, her voice very uncertain. "He was a born pilot. He had done great things in gliding—pushed the skills of sailplane flying to new frontiers, explored the upper air currents, represented

this country in competitions all over the world. And yet, this man crashed in a glider far less complicated than his own machine. He crashed on a day of good flying weather, within minutes after a routine launch at the field he knew like the back of his hand. And he didn't come out of the crash alive."

"Denver," repeated Jerome, trying the name over. It meant nothing to him. "I don't seem to remember seeing any report."

"He only rated a few lines in the national press."

"But the lack of lines seems to indicate that there was nothing . . . needing explanation."

"There was a great deal that needed explanation."

"But the police must have been called in, since it was a case of accident?"

"They were. But it was no accident."

"What was the verdict at the inquest?"

"Accidental Death. A depressed fracture of the skull."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I didn't protest," she said. "I was too dazed. It took me nearly a week to realize that Richie had been hustled into his grave, his name written into the list of over-confident fools who take unnecessary risks in the air."

"But if you have doubts or suspicions, surely your best course would be to go to the police now."

"Doubts and suspicions! Oh, God, my nights are haunted by them!" She burst into tears, sweeping her cup of coffee aside with a wide-flung gesture as she buried her head in her arms.

Jerome didn't know what to do. He patted the silk-jersey-clad shoulder and wished to heaven he'd never come. Gliding! What the hell did he know about gliding? The best thing would be to listen, let her get it all off her chest, slip in a word or two about "even the best of us making mistakes," and then bow himself out. But even

then he had an uneasy feeling that he wouldn't get off scot-free. This poor kid was desperately unhappy. She would cling. And—this worried him—though emotionally she mightn't be tough, she had struck him as intellectually above average. If she had doubts, she might have good grounds.

By and by she sat up and mopped her eyes. Joe Vanning would have said the tears had put the finishing touch to the havoc caused by the black silk jersey dress. It might be worth trying to help her if only to get her out of mourning.

"Suspicions," she said. "I'll tell you my suspicions. Richie was a married man. That's why he was my lover and not my husband. His wife wouldn't divorce him. Susan is a beautiful woman—beautiful in a way that takes you by the throat. There's at least one man who'd do almost anything to get her all to himself."

"Just a moment," Jerome cut in. "You say that Mrs. Denver wouldn't divorce her husband, which argues that she loved him. Then you say that this other man imagined all he had to do was get rid of the husband and he could have Susan Denver. Are you sure you're clear on the subject?"

"It's difficult to explain unless you know Susan. You'll understand better once you've met her. She was fond of Richie in her way, perhaps fonder of him than of anyone else in the world. But she didn't love him in the way I use the word." She swallowed hard. "Richie once told me that when he first met Susan he was mad about her. It happens to practically every man who sees her. She doesn't do anything. She's not a femme fatale. In fact I think she wishes sometimes that she *didn't* have this effect on men. It's not that she's hard or cold. She's—how can I describe it—she's too well-organized to fall head over heels in love. She can be a good friend. I speak from experience—she's been a good friend to me."

Jerome must have started, because she smiled with wry tolerance.

"You're thinking it sounds a queer set-up. I suppose it was. But it was because she didn't feel strongly about Richie that she wasn't jealous. She treated me like a wrong-headed kid sister. You see, I wasn't the first: . . . She was sure it would pass, like the others, and so she told him she wouldn't divorce. In a way I admire her for it. She's fastidious, and she didn't want her name plastered over the newspapers as it would have been if there had been a divorce, me being my father's daughter. I think her view was that if Richie really loved me he would prove it by not getting tired of me. But she wasn't going to go through the divorce courts for just another of his fly-by-night affairs."

"I suppose that's reasonable," Jerome agreed.

Barbara pulled her wet hankerchief taut between her two fists. "Don't you see?" she urged. "A man who loved her might have thought, 'She doesn't want the misery of a divorce but she doesn't love him. Suppose Richie should die. . . .?'"

"He might say that to himself. But I doubt if he'd act on it."

"You haven't seen Susan Denver."

"But agreeing for the sake of argument that he might decide to act, what could he do? You say there was a gliding accident and the police were brought in. They found nothing wrong. What could the supposed murderer have done?"

"I've only been gliding since last September. But I can think of at least one way of sabotaging the aircraft so that it would crash."

"Now look here, Barbara, the police must have inspected that wreckage."

"But what do they know about glider construction?"

"They would call in an expert if they were in doubt."

"Oh yes," she said with scorn, "an expert. And he examined the remains of the Polaris and said there was nothing structurally wrong that could account for the accident. But he was anxious to believe that to be true. It would be bad for the club if negligence were suspected. Besides, he—that very man—stands to gain financially by Richie's death, and he was envious of Richie's skill and ability as a pilot, tired of being compared unfavourably with him. If he saw something wrong, do you think he'd hesitate to cover up? Especially when he knew the stupid policeman with him didn't know a pitot head from a turn-buckle?"

"That's a very serious accusation, Barbara. Men value their own integrity--"

"You don't know. You simply don't know! They hated Richie because he was clever and adventurous, they blamed him because they didn't make vast profits on their investments—oh, I tell you, they've shed no tears for him! And I'm not the only one who's wondered if that wreckage was properly examined. Other people at the gliding club have wondered about it, I know they have. Only they don't want to do anything about it."

"And you do? Are you sure? If there really was no sabotage, you'll make a lot of trouble for somebody and all for nothing."

"There was something wrong, I know it! And I want it set right in the records. Richie was incapable of such bad airmanship. For Susan's sake, too—"

"His wife? You're doing it for his wife's sake?"

"You think I'm rationalizing my own unwillingness to believe that Richie could make a mistake. It isn't that. If what I believe is true, Susan might conceivably marry her husband's murderer."

"Now that is rather gruesome."

"The day Richie crashed," she said earnestly, "there

were only nine or ten people at the airfield. At least four of those people imagine they had a grudge against Richie for one reason or another, and for all I know the number may be higher. This isn't my imagination, Jerome. I've heard members who weren't there that day gossiping and naming those who were, and wondering if everything was as it should be."

"But what do you want me to do, my dear? I know nothing about gliding. You have expertise that ought to help you —"

"No, because I'm so biased against this one man that I may be trying to build his gallows on a foundation of fantasy. He's so desperately in love with Susan, Jerome, he'd do anything. Now that she's free, he scarcely leaves her side. When he looks at her, he can't hide how he feels. And he's beginning to *hope*."

"She really must be something," murmured Jerome.

"Wait," Barbara said, and went swiftly out of the room. She came back carrying a picture in a silver frame. "Pick her out," she commanded, handing it to him.

It had been a snapshot, now expensively enlarged. There was the fuselage and part of the wing of an aircraft in the background. A group of people took up the foreground, their faces screwed up in the direct rays of the sun after the behest of some amateur photographer: three men and three women. Barbara herself was one of them but it was difficult to recognize her in a cocoon-like flying suit and with her forehead reduced almost to nothing by the furrows of staring into the sun and by the edge of a ridiculous knitted ski-type cap which sat nearly on her brow. Her face was slightly turned away from the lens, towards the man who stood on her right, rather similarly attired. She was smiling at him. It was easy to guess, from her smile, that this was the late Richard Denver.

He was tall, and even the silly cap couldn't detract

from his authority. He wasn't handsome, but he had something more important than looks—a strong vitality which dominated the scene even through the hail-storm effect of the over-enlarged snap. "A born leader"—the words sprang into Jerome's mind at sight of his laughing self-assurance. Strange to think that he had led himself into the grave. Strange to think that so much vitality should be quenched forever. So much vitality. . . . In real life, he might have been a bit overpowering to have around.

On the other side of this man stood two women. "Pick her out," Barbara had said.

A face like Queen Nefertiti of Egypt, fine-boned and accentuated by vast, quiet, smiling dark eyes. Smooth dark hair worn short—it could only be raven-black, for even in this appalling photograph it shone smooth and lustrous. She had raised one hand to brush back a frond of hair from her cheek. Her hand—even her hand—was perfect.

"You see?" Barbara said, and when he looked up he discovered she was smiling with a tolerance in which there was the faintest trace of envy.

He felt himself flushing a little. "Why hasn't she been discovered for the Movies?" he asked lightly.

"She'd look good as the oriental princess in some Hollywood epic, wouldn't she? But I told you—Susan's not that sort. She's civilized—not conventional, I don't mean that. Her standards are high but they allow for things that would shock other people. I remember," Barbara mused, her eyes on events in the past, "the time we all went to France for the Franco-British Competitions in October. . . ."

"But I thought you only began gliding in September?"

"Oh, Lord, I wasn't going to do any flying! I was only co-driver on Richie's retrieving team." She paused so long that he had to prompt her.

"Retrieving team?"

"Yes, you see the glider is launched and flies away, and in distance competitions the pilot who covers the most ground wins. But then he has to be got back for the next day's flying. Once he's down, he can't get up again—no engine, as you so rightly observed. So a retrieving team has to go and fetch him back. It consists usually of two or more people, who drive after him on his line of flight towing a big trailer. When he has landed they come to the spot, de-rig the glider, and stow it in the trailer."

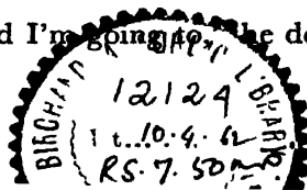
"It must be a mighty big trailer."

"It is. But the glider comes to pieces, of course."

"It does what?"

"That's what I meant by 'de-rig'. It comes to pieces like a child's construction kit, and then we stow it in the trailer and drive back to the launching field. It can mean a drive of seven or eight hours either way. I went as co-driver with Susan and a shy little man called Bryan Mathewson. When the competitions were over we didn't rush home; we took our time over the drive north. All that time together, and we never had a cross word, Susan and I, although she knew. . . . You'd think we'd be at daggers drawn with each other, wouldn't you? But no. Susan kept herself busy 'organizing' everything: she did the map-reading and translated for us when we wanted to do any shopping; I was in charge of the passports and permits and so on. I have her passport still, in my travel bag, and a sweater she hadn't room for in hers. You'd think I'd throw them at her and say, 'Take them, I want nothing to remind me of how you stood between Richie and me'. Or that she'd come and say, 'Give me my belongings, and after that we need never see each other again'. But Susan's different from other people. You'll realize it when you meet her."

"You take it for granted I'm going to be demurred."



"So you are, now you've seen her picture." She took it from him and stood it on the table. "She's opening a restaurant not far from here, in Brandywine Place—it's a turning off Baker Street. It's a good idea. She's going to make a special appeal to the gliding fraternity. Richie's name will attract them, and besides she's chosen a marvellous name for it —'Green Air', which is what the gliding pilot most desires to obtain. It's a term meaning 'good gliding conditions'. This man on the right of the picture—Leonard Catt—he's doing the décor for her and it's really marvellous. Makes you think you're airborne. I'm sure it'll be a success."

"Susan seems a woman of initiative."

"Well, she has to do something for a living because I believe Richie's business wasn't doing too well. He was in glider design, you see, and a couple of years ago he started up on his own account."

"There can't be much money in that," he agreed.

"No, but Richie'd got this wonderful design for a new sailplane—an advanced two-seater. If you knew a little bit about gliding you'd realize that there's a real need for a plane like that. A lot of the club members thought so and they'd got money invested. But you know how it is with a new project. There were teething troubles, and an awful lot of grumbles." She touched the figure of the other woman in the photograph with her index finger. "Jane Osbertson. A born grumbler. Her husband had money invested. Pussy Catt too, I believe. And perhaps Bryan too. This is Bryan, this other man here that you can hardly see because he's so short."

"The one who went to France for the competitions?"

"Yes."

"Quite an investors' rally. Did you have money in the business?"

"No, he hadn't talked much about the 'Pteron' design at that stage."

"But later he did?"

"Yes, but—" and she blushed, miserably—"Daddy wouldn't give me any money to invest. He said terrible things—that Richie was only after my money."

Jerome kept his eyes on the photograph, his thoughts weaving in and out of the facts Barbara had supplied and fitting them against the people pictured there. With a wife like Susan, it seemed incredible that Denver could really prefer the shy immaturity of Barbara Haskell. But the alert, rather ruthless features might easily belong to an insensitive man, a go-getting man, a man who might be capable of looking at Barbara and picturing her father's cheque-book.

Yes, an interesting man, the late Richard Denver.

But when he left Barbara's flat shortly afterwards, promising to think about her request for his help, it was not about the dead pilot he was wondering. The sweetly regal face of Susan Denver hung before him in the stormy darkness of the late March evening.

So he told himself that after so much talking he was in need of a cup of coffee and instead of going home where coffee was instantly available from a tin, went in search of Susan Denver's intriguingly named restaurant.

THREE

FOR once, in these days of high pressure advertising, the reality surpassed both description and photograph. Her colouring was warmer than the snapshot had led him to expect: her eyes, instead of being glossy black, were gridelin-grey flecked with that violet that sometimes glints in the sheen of a pheasant's wing, and they were lit with a friendly glow. Jerome's first view of her was as she stood with her face upturned towards a young man perched on a stepladder alongside the restaurant's coffee bar. He was fitting on the ceiling an arrangement that looked like a cross between an epidiascope and an old-fashioned shadow-play screen, and from this a reflected image on the surrounding walls gave the effect of clouds sailing lazily by.

"My word, that's clever," Jerome said admiringly.

The man looked down, pushing back floppy light brown hair. "Like it? Gives the effect of entering cu-nim at 4,000 feet, I hope."

"You may be right but I'm a stranger here."

"Not a flier?"

"Only as an airline passenger."

"They have their uses, those monstrous constructions with fire in their belly," he said, and finished screwing home the last wing nut. "What d'you think, Susan? Do you like it?"

"Pussy, it's marvellous. It really does give the effect of clouds on the move."

Pussy. So this was Leonard Galt, who was responsible for the décor. It really was rather special. A cleverly executed mural made believe that the coffee-drinkers were floating on a level with mountain peaks; there was even an eagle, its wings motionless as it soared, turning its head

to see who had dared enter its kingdom. This was the ground floor, intended only as an espresso bar. A sign depicting a glider in a dive pointed the way to the floor below where more substantial fare, suitable to solid earth, could be obtained. A glance down the stairway showed that it was being fitted up to look like a hangar. Druggeting had been put down to protect the new carpet from workmen's boots, and everything smelt of paint, distemper, and varnish. Although the place was open for business, there were only two customers in a booth at the far end of the coffee bar.

"Can I get you something?" Susan said.

"Black coffee, please. Sorry if I took you away from what you were doing."

"No, that's quite all right. I don't really do any of the serving, I'm just filling the gap between the time the day assistant goes off and the late assistant comes on. Pussy, we'll have to speak to that girl. Either she's going to come on time or we get someone else. Once this place gets going I'll be too busy supervising to have time to fiddle with this frightful coffee machine."

"Just opened?" Jerome inquired, condemning himself before he thought of it to the fiction that he knew nothing about her.

Susan explained that this was a new venture although she had previous experience of the catering industry. "My father was a hotelier. I did actually spend two years in Switzerland learning the game but it's hard work. I was glad to give it up when I married."

"I'm sure you have a success on your hands here. It's very original and attractive."

"That's all thanks to Pussy." Pussy, having descended the steps, was folding them to carry them away. He paused on hearing his name. "He's Leonard Catt, the stage designer—"

"Oh, of course! Stratford last year!" The sets for "Richard III" and "Much Ado"—no wonder he'd thought he knew the name as Barbara spoke of Pussy. Jerome turned now to the designer and said sincerely, "I think you've done a first-class job here."

"Not too theatrical?" He leaned his steps against the bar and lounged there, surveying his work.

"Don't be silly, Pussy dear! And anyhow your name alone is worth a hundred pounds in advertisements. Do you remember Tommy Wilding-Jones, who flew in the competitions last year? Who's in public relations? He happened to drop in yesterday, and he says he'll get a paragraph in the gossip columns about the place."

"It's nice to have useful friends," Jerome observed wickedly.

To his amazement she looked offended.

"It's all right, Susan my sweet, it's a joke," Pussy interposed hastily.

A flaw, a flaw in the jewel. Could it be she had no sense of humour? She smiled a grave, apologetic smile and to change the subject said, "Are you interested in gliding at all?"

"I've always been interested," he lied, "although I've never had the chance to do anything about it."

"Oh, you ought to take it up! It's the best sport in the world, the last stronghold of the individualist. Once you're up there on your own, nobody can make you do what you don't want to do, nobody can argue with you, nobody can save you if anything goes wrong—"

"Pussy!"

"Oh, my God!" He came swiftly round the coffee bar, to seize her hand. "I'm sorry, Susan—you know I didn't mean—You know I wasn't thinking of that!"

His stepladder, left unsupported, swayed ominously. Jerome occupied himself with steadying it to prevent

eavesdropping on a conversation that seemed to consist almost entirely of apologies from Pussy and muffled disclaimers from Susan. Finally they remembered his presence.

"You'll have to excuse us," Pussy said, reddening. "I was very ill-judging a moment ago, and now I'm being ill-timed. I beg your pardon."

"That's all right. I don't feel ill-used."

"No, but I feel ill-bred."

"You'd be ill-advised to get ill at ease over it."

They grinned at each other, two strangers who had discovered an enthusiasm in common, a liking for the twists and turns of the English tongue. Susan looked from one to the other, at a loss to know why they smiled.

"You really *must* take up gliding," Pussy cried. "I'm sure you're the type."

"Is there a type?"

"You know there isn't, Pussy," Susan objected. "They're as diversified as a Zoo-ful of animals."

"Or an asylum-ful of lunatics. To be really keen on gliding," Pussy explained, "you have to be a bit cracked. Some of us are more cracked than others—I often think Chev isn't safe to know at full moon, and Bryan Mathewson is definitely odd at any time."

"Oh, you're always so mean about Bryan," she said indulgently. "He's a sweet man."

"But then, you see, I don't like sweet things. All the same, he's a damn good pilot. Now you," he added, reverting to Jerome, "you'd have to be folded in three to get in the cockpit—"

"Should I find it worth while after I'd submitted to that?"

"Infinitely! You see that beastie over there?" He pointed to the eagle on the mural. "I've been alongside him and seen him actually do that."

"I *thought* he was drawn from life. His gleary eye is all too real."

"Haven't you ever wondered how we look to him? How it feels to soar, soundlessly and slowly, over—"

"Richie always used to say gliders *weren't* soundless."

"Neither they are, but don't interrupt when I'm waxing poetic, Susan! Now where was I? Well, anyhow, all you have to do is find a thermal and you can tweak that eagle's nose for him if you want to."

"No thanks, he might be offended. Besides, what's a thermal?"

"It's a sort of bubble of warm air. You know that hot air rises?"

"People tell me so all the time."

"So if the air rises," Pussy said, a grin on his wide mouth, "the glider will rise too."

"But what goes up must come down—they tell me that too."

"Only until you find another thermal. And so you go along on a hot summer day, circling upwards until you've got all the 'lift' you can out of that thermal and then flying off, slowly descending, until you find the next thermal. You can travel miles that way."

"Wouldn't it be quicker by jet plane?"

"Philistine! Devil-worshipper! You get into a jet plane and what happens? Zoom—thirty minutes later you're in Paris. But what have you learned on the way? Nothing!"

"But think what you can learn in Paris in the time you've saved going by jet," he replied.

"I must say I like Paris," Susan put in perfectly seriously. "The shops are so full of lovely things. If ever I make my fortune I shall go and live in Paris."

"Well, if we can get this committee going to save the Pteron Two-seater, you stand a good chance of making your fortune, pet. Mrs. Denver's husband," he added in

explanation to Jerome, "for some time before his death was working on a design for a new sailplane."

Susan shook her head. "It hasn't made any money up to now, Pussy."

"But that was only because Richie had no head for business, angel. He had enough savvy to know that a two-seater like the Pteron would enable pilots to get instruction in the more intricate stages, but not enough to handle the business side." To Jerome he said, "You see, once you get past the absolute beginner's stage, you have to learn the hard way. They send you on to an intermediate glider or an advanced one, but it's a single-seater. As I said before, you're on your own. You're almost bound to be scared or at a loss on more than one occasion when you start solo on a plane fit for soaring in strange air conditions. This new design, the Pteron, would allow the fairly advanced pilot to get tuition in a machine that matched his skill, and with an instructor alongside to give advice when needed."

"But is there really much of a market?"

"There are gliding clubs all over the world just waiting for a sailplane like the Pteron."

"If I do take up gliding can you guarantee to have this new machine ready for me at the time I'll be ready for it?"

"What do you mean, if? You must, you simply must take up gliding. Instinct tells me you're a born soaring pilot."

"You mean I have the requisite streak of the loony?"

"And nice long legs for tramping over the flying field to help push the glider back to the launch. Yes, I see sketched in the air above your head a pilot's badge. Are you doing anything on Saturday?"

"Selling books. Why?"

"Boots?" said Susan, her eyebrows going up.

"Books. In the Charing Cross Road."

"Pity. The weather forecast says the wind will moderate, and visibility will be good. If you were free I could take you down to the gliding club. You couldn't assign someone else to the selling of books?"

"I could, yes. I'd love to come," Jerome said, and was astonished at himself, for up to that moment he'd sincerely believed he wasn't going to get himself mixed up with these people.

If he had been influenced by hopes of seeing Susan Denver at the club, he was justly punished next moment.

"You're not really going down to Mollin on Saturday?" she cried in vexation.

"We-well . . . you know I want to try the milk-run to the West Country. If I don't do it while this north-east wind keeps up, I've had it for this year."

"But you were going to put the finishing touches to the downstairs restaurant?"

"I'll do that Monday Susan. You're not going to open it until you get the barbecue fittings, anyhow."

"Won't you be at the club?" Jerome asked, not hiding his disappointment very well.

"Now that my husband has passed on I've no reason to go," she said. "I'm not a flier, you know. In fact, gliders frighten me, actually I never did feel they could be safe. And as things turned out—Oh well, that's all over now. And I don't go down to the field any more."

"Maybe I oughtn't to go on Saturday," Pussy said in the tone of someone who can foresee a great decision waiting to be faced, but putting it off for the present. "But I've promised our friend here . . ."

"Don't mind me," Jerome said, willing to back out.

"But I really would like to try the milk-run—"

"Where do you take this milk to?"

Pussy chuckled. "It's just a nickname. It's the run

down to Devon or Cornwall. We can only do it when the wind's in this direction—I mean in non-soaring conditions. I've never done it yet. I can get my Gold C Badge out of it if I bring it off. You get a more advanced badge for meeting more advanced standards, you understand. We all sweat like the devil to get on to the next badge. Susan, you come down to Mollin too—just for the weekend."

"No. I've too much to do here. Besides—"

"What?"

"You know the kind of gossip that's flying around down there. I'd rather not go." She said this in a low tone, intended for Pussy's ears only.

"Then I'll stay in London."

"No, no—you go. I'd know you were miserable if you didn't go."

They argued it back and forth in lowered voices. Finally Susan broke the deadlock by turning and saying to Jerome, "But you've let your coffee get cold. I'll get you some fresh." And to Pussy, "Don't forget you'd offered to take a guest down."

"So I had. Well, we'd better take it as settled. Do you prefer to use your own transport or shall I give you a lift?"

"My own transport is that wellknown firm, Shanks' Pony Limited. I'd be glad of a lift."

"Eight a.m. too early for you?"

"No, that's fine."

"Give me your phone number and I'll give you a tinkle if there's any change in the arrangement. And look, write down your address too, so I know which doorbell to ring on Saturday."

"It's the door at the side of the bookshop, which I regret to have to tell you is called 'Rarities'—that's to tempt in the book collectors who'll pay high prices. I live in the flat over the shop. The door is that bright yellow

one you'll see sandwiched in between the sports clothes shop and the shoe-shop four doors down from the Circus."

"Oh, *that* shop! I bought an awfully useful book from you once—helped me no end with a Restoration play I was designing for."

"You wouldn't have finished with it, by any chance? I've an Australian wool magnate battering my door down for Restoration literature. I'll give you a good price."

"If I can find it, I'll bring it along on Saturday morning. By the way, whom shall I ask for?"

"I live alone there, so the problem doesn't arise. But my name's Jerome Aylwin."

He was picking up his cup of fresh coffee as he spoke and not looking at either. But at the moment he spoke his own name, he thought he heard someone make a faint sound.

An indrawn breath.

FOUR

WHEN he reached home he rang Barbara Haskell.

"It's rather late to be calling you but I thought you'd want to know—"

"You've decided to take on the inquiry?" she broke in, her voice vibrant with eagerness.

"Not exactly, but I'm going to the club ground on Saturday."

"The club? The gliding club?"

"At Mollin—yes."

"But it's strictly members only, Jerome. And I'd rather not take you there as my guest because that would put people—some people—against you."

"I'm going with Pussy Catt."

"Pussy? But how on earth did you manage?"

"It wasn't difficult." He found himself carefully not mentioning the visit to Susan's new restaurant. "But I wanted to ask if you'll be there?"

"I certainly will. I've been down every week-end since Richie's crash, and if the place was open during the week at this time of year I'd skip classes and go mid-week too. I'm determined to get a satisfactory answer about Richie's death, Jerome. I'll haunt that airfield until I get it."

"Well, don't haunt me. As far as you're concerned I'm a total stranger until Pussy introduces us on Saturday. After I've had a dekko, I'll try to get a chat with you and see if we can come to any conclusions. But I don't promise anything, Barbara, and even if I end up agreeing that Denver's death needs looking into I'm far from thinking I'm the man for that job."

"But if I can get someone disinterested and intelligent to take a look—that's all I want. And perhaps find enough

grounds to make a case that would interest the police."

"We'll see. One more thing—now you've achieved Part One of your objective, restrict your haunting to the airfield and leave the bookshop alone, huh?"

It was a good job he made this suggestion for next day, about the time Barbara had been wont to show up, who should come in but Pussy Catt with Susan at his side. Heads turned as they threaded their way through the shop. Susan, like Barbara and for the same reason, wore black. But on her it looked perfect. And Joe Vanning showed visible approval.

"She's asking for you, me boy-o," he reported, putting his head round the door of the tiny office. "What is this strange power you have over women in black? It must be hypnotism. It certainly isn't your looks. This one's a step ahead of the other damsel because she asked for you by name. Would you like me to distract her escort's attention while you spirit her upstairs to your flat?"

"You've been reading Casanova's *Memoirs* again," Jerome said kindly. "Take an aspirin and lie down."

The reason for the visit was to bring the book, "Amusements Serious and Comical," by Tom Brown. "I took it to show Susan this morning," Pussy explained, "and we decided we might as well drop in with it in case I forgot it tomorrow."

"Thank you, I'm glad to have it. Would you like some tea?"

"But we'd be in the way—"

"Not at all. I told you, my flat's upstairs." He showed them to the door leading to the narrow passage at the side of the shop, giving Joe Vanning a wink as they went past. Upstairs, he left them to read their way round three walls full of books while he went to the kitchen and made the tea. He had a feeling they had an ulterior motive, and presently was proved right.

"We were talking about you this morning—about bringing the book back and all that," Pussy said. "And we wondered if maybe we ought to explain something to you. I mean, if we don't tell you beforehand, you may be a bit taken aback when you get down to Mollin Ridge. As Susan was saying yesterday, there's more gossip flying about than gliders."

"I don't really feel you owe me any explanation," he protested.

"'Owe' is perhaps not the word. We'd just feel more comfortable. At least, I don't care so much, personally—but Susan's worried for my sake. Which is typical, as you'll see when you know her better."

"Now, Pussy," she said, holding up a finger. "You promised to do it in a business like way."

"So I will. The fact is," Pussy said, after a gulp, "that there are some folk at the club saying that Richard Denver's death was no accident."

Jerome looked shocked. "But that's a very serious thing to say."

"I only wish some of those idiots would see that!" Susan cried in distress. "No, Pussy, let me say it! Things have been hinted about you that I simply can't forgive. And Jerome ought to know from the outset that there's nothing in it."

"But what exactly are these people implying against Pussy?"

Pussy moved restlessly. "I don't know that so very many people are saying it, really. It's one particular person. . . . Well, you see, Jerome, this person is saying I wasn't sorry to see Richie go and that, if his death wasn't accidental, I'd have the know-how to make his glider unsafe."

"And in your opinion *was* his death an accident?"

Before Pussy could reply, Susan had taken it up. "What does one mean by 'accident', Jerome? I know the medical

evidence at the inquest gave my husband a clean bill of health, but after all, that doesn't take nerves into account."

"Richie had nerves of iron," Pussy said resentfully. "He'd come down after flying blind inside a cu-nim cloud tower in rough air that would have turned a lesser man's hair white, and he'd be grinning like a Cheshire cat."

"But you didn't see the way Vivian Haskell went for him."

"*Who?*" interjected Jerome in alarm.

"Vivian Haskell, the big construction firm owner. He and my husband had a fight on the airfield."

"Oh, now, Susan—a fight hardly fits what Piglet described."

"Piglet?" groaned Jerome. "Who's Piglet? And where does Haskell come in?"

"He came down to the club flying field that Saturday—the 3rd of March. The truth is—" he glanced apologetically at Susan and stopped. Then speaking directly to her he said, "He'll hear about it soon from the others, my sweet, so he may as well hear it now, unembroidered. You see, Jerome, there had been a bit of a 'thing' between Richie and Vivian Haskell's daughter, a rather pathetic kid called Barbara. You'll see her tomorrow. She's at the club every weekend though why I don't know because she never flies any more."

"She won't take any other instructor now that Richie's gone," Susan put in sadly. "Poor child. It was a passing schoolgirl crush she had on him, Pussy."

"It was a bit more than a crush and we both know it," Pussy averred. "Stop trying to shield the kid, Susan. Besides, she makes no secret of it herself. And that's why her father arrived—to speak the famous line, 'Unhand my chee-ild, you villain!'"

"And he chose to do it on the flying field?" Jerome asked, greatly astonished.

"I don't know if he chose it. That's where it seems to have happened."

"But what did happen?"

"Piglet—that's a spotty youth rejoicing in the name of Percy Swinefold, hence Piglet—he was helping at the launch and saw the whole thing. He says Haskell made a bit of an angry speech, Richie laughed him off, Haskell lost his temper and made a grab at Richie, and Richie pushed him away. That's all. Hardly a fight."

"But Richie was upset, Pussy. After all, I was there too and I saw his face. I think how it must have shaken him, morally and emotionally."

Pussy looked as if he thought Susan's dead husband was unlikely to be moved, morally or emotionally, by a father's reproaches. But he didn't say so.

"I'm not blaming Mr. Haskell," she went on quietly. "He had provocation, heaven knows. But why people are looking further than that episode for a reason for Richie's accident, I don't understand. I believe—and after all I knew him best—that he was very upset by that encounter and as a result he flew with less ability than usual."

"So you said at the inquest, but I—" Pussy broke off, shrugged slightly, and nodded. "All right, there is probably a lot in that. And the point of all this, Jerome, is that you shouldn't pay too much heed to any weird tales you may hear tomorrow."

"I shouldn't think Jerome will want to go now, after hearing what a terrible crew we are," Susan said, quite seriously.

"Oh, scandal-mongering doesn't put me off," Jerome assured her. On the contrary, it only made him the more interested in the case because, although she herself apparently didn't realize it, her chances of building a new life were impaired by the speculation about her husband's death. After all, if Pussy was a suspect, why else would he

have done it except to get Susan for himself? And if, as seemed likely, she was fond of Pussy, she was going to get hurt.

They finished their tea, made small talk about his flat for five more minutes—"a charming place", Susan murmured but her ability to tell convincing lies was about equal with her sense of humour; clearly she thought his flat too empty and barnlike, too lacking in comfort. It was true that, in her elegant coat of soft black leather she looked rather out of place here.

He saw them off from his mustard yellow door. Still musing on what he'd heard, he went back along the narrow passage and into the shop. He had scarcely sat down and picked up the correspondence file once more when the flicker of light on the metal buttons of her coat made him look up. Susan Denver had come into the shop again.

She came to the door of the office, looking apologetic. "Don't think I'm awful, but I've left Pussy at the corner and slipped back for a word in private. He has an appointment in St. Martin's Lane, luckily."

"Would you like to come upstairs again?" he invited. "But I warn you my partner will suspect the worst."

"No thanks," she said sedately. He must remember that banter was wasted on her. She would smile when she was pleased—and the effect was wonderful, like Midsummer Day in November. But he doubted if she ever smiled because someone said something funny. Never mind. She was so lovely he could forgive her her lack of a sense of fun.

"What was it you wanted to say?" he asked, offering her a chair inside the small dusty office. "Something about Pussy?"

"Yes, it'll only take a minute. Jerome, you and he hit it off together awfully well last night. Pussy doesn't make

friends easily, you know, which is why people are ready to turn on him and say these awful things."

"People? I thought Pussy said it was only one person?"

She sighed, the grey eyes clouding. "He's been lucky, in a way. Things have reached my ears that haven't reached his, that's all. But I suppose women are quicker at sensing disapproval than men are."

"And you think that several people disapprove of Pussy?"

"Please don't let it alter your first impression of him, Jerome. He needs a friend now. It would be beastly if you were influenced by these wicked lies that people are telling."

Jerome, who had not exactly intended to enter in a blood-brotherhood with Pussy, was a little put out at her speech. Because she was fond of Pussy — in love with Pussy? — she wanted to find allies for him. Jerome couldn't promise to be an ally. If there were any foundation in Barbara Haskell's story, Pussy was a likely suspect; and clearly he was Barbara's own chief suspect. But Jerome could promise not to be influenced by mere gossip.

"You're very concerned about Pussy?" he added, and was horrified to hear in his voice a faithful echo of the note on which Pussy had spoken about Richie, her husband.

"Oh yes. He's a great, great friend," she said. "I can't tell you how dear and good he's been, especially since Richie passed on. But not in the way some folk think."

"Forgive me for saying so, but if there really is unfriendly talk, wouldn't it be better to do something about it?"

"You mean stop seeing Pussy? I've thought of that," she admitted slowly, "but he'd be so upset."

So he wasn't so superlatively important to her as she was to him. So much the better. But, "I didn't mean that," he rejoined. "I meant, wouldn't it be better to have them

all out into the open, the doubts about your husband's death?"

"But I haven't any doubts," she answered. "He died as the result of a crash brought on by lack of concentration when he was flying. But suppose I took up your suggestion, who would suffer? Poor Barbara Haskell and her father, that's who. Mr. Haskell is a good man; I talked to him after the quarrel with Richie and he apologized very humbly—No, really, it would be too dreadful to drag all that out in public. I hate dirty linen."

He recollectcd that Barbara had called Susan "fastidious". There was something admirable about it, this sense of propriety so foreign to the spirit of the times. People these days weren't averse from baring their sores in public: when he thought of some of the so-called newspapers and the way ordinary decent human beings turned their souls inside out so as to achieve the limelight, he felt a medal should be struck for a woman like Susan.

"Besides," she went on earnestly, "I don't want anyone to think I doubt Pussy, not by the slightest degree. Richie's death was an accident."

But Pussy himself had been on the verge of disagreeing with that theory earlier on. And next day as they threaded their way out of London, Jerome put the question that had lingered in his mind ever since.

"When Susan said yesterday that her husband was shaken by that passage of arms with Vivian Haskell, you looked as if you had other ideas, Pussy. Do you think she's wrong?"

"I think she's deceiving herself," was the tolerant reply. "Strictly between you and me, Jerome, Richie Denver was a bloody selfish brute, and I can't see him climbing into the Polaris all of a tremble with remorse over anything Haskell said. Besides, Piglet says it wasn't so. He says Denver was as cool as a cucumber, and I believe it. There

was the usual cockpit check and the attaching of the cable—Piglet says he carried it out as he always did, quickly and faultlessly. Then he took off. A few minutes later he crashed. Am I being asked to believe that he was suddenly overcome by a guilty conscience in the space of about ten minutes, to the extent that he couldn't tell the rudder pedals from the joystick?"

"But you do believe it was an accident?" Jerome persisted.

Pussy slowly nodded. "An accident," he agreed. "But you know the expression, 'accidentally on purpose'. I think Denver's death was like that. It was an accident, arranged by someone on purpose."

FIVE

"Did you say anything at the inquest?" Jerome asked noncommittally.

"No, what do you take me for?" Pussy returned, rather irritably. "Get someone into trouble for doing me a good turn? Not Doolittle likely."

"But what will Susan say if she ever finds out?"

"She won't find out. Susan knows nothing about the inner workings of a glider and she doesn't really believe in the gossip about sabotage, I think mainly because she can't picture how it could have been done. That's her trouble—she can't believe people have harmful intentions to each other. Look at the way she stuck by that black-guard of a husband! And you know, Jerome, what makes it so ghastly is that he didn't want her to stick by him any more."

"I don't quite get you."

"You didn't know him. God, he was a sweep! He only had one good point tho. I could see and that was his love of gliding. Maybe that was what was wrong with him. People weren't important to him, only flying machines. I think he originally married Susan for her money. You heard her say her parents owned a hotel. She's not one to brag, but it wasn't a roast-meat-and-two-veg-and-don't-tread-mud-into-the-parlour kind of hotel. It had seen stars in its time. When the parents died they left her quite a property, but when she married Denver she sold it and invested the money in his schemes. I think she often regretted it, but then at the time she was probably swept off her feet—I told you he was a sweep!" Pussy grinned wryly.

"Have you any reason for saying he was after her

money? I mean, he *got* her money, from your account—but it doesn't follow—"

"He didn't love her. It wouldn't have occurred to Denver to *marry* for love. I'd known him a while—eight or nine years. He met and married Susan four years ago. A couple of years ago it dawned on him that as he'd run through her money she was a dead loss to him—I watched it dawning. He began playing around with other women. And he was thorough. He wanted a divorce, you understand."

"And she wouldn't?"

"Precisely. In a way, Susan's not very perceptive. I dare say you've noticed her sense of humour isn't very keen and the same could be said of her ability to follow other people's thought processes. For instance, this gossip about the accident not being an accident: she can't really believe that people are thinking it. The same was true of her relationship with Richie: she thought she understood him, but she didn't. He wasn't just finding amusement outside the marriage vows, he wanted her to divorce him so he could find another rich wife. Barbara Haskell was the one he'd chosen. Barbara's much, much richer than Susan ever was. But Susan persisted in thinking it was just a passing affair."

"An explosive situation."

"You've said it. Richie was desperate to get his freedom. I think he hoped and prayed that if all else failed his behaviour would drive Susan into my arms in search of comfort—and God knows I was willing enough."

"But not Susan," Jerome said with inner satisfaction.

"But not Susan. Which is why Barbara has good grounds, I suppose, for thinking I cut the Gordian knot by arranging an accident for Denver. I even might have," Pussy added thoughtfully, "if I'd thought of it."

"I wouldn't say things like that if I were you. Some listeners might take you seriously."

"I mean it seriously. I'm not the only one either. I could think of at least two people who'd have been glad to arrange Denver's funeral, and I'm prepared to believe that one of them moved from plans to practice."

"But if the wreckage was inspected, surely any monkey business would have been noticeable?"

"Not if it was done with a little artistry. Besides, the fellow who inspected the wreck—he was one of the two I was thinking of."

"Pussy, do you realize that's slanderous?"

"It's my turn today to be on the end that casts the stones, not on the end that gets them in the eye. I find it very refreshing. I don't enjoy being under suspicion, you know."

"Who does? But this other chap—has he as much incentive to want to be rid of Denver as you had?"

Pussy smiled rather scornfully. "Do I sound poetic and old-fashioned if I say that nobody could have as much incentive as I had? But other prizes attract other minds. Money, for instance. Denver was barring the way to a tidy sum for quite a few people. You see, he'd got seven or eight of us to invest in the Pierco, and we were right to do that. But we were absolute mutts to let him keep control of the company. He was a halfwit where business matters were concerned, so all our money went down the drain. That in itself would be a strong motive, especially to someone who'd got a sizeable investment. I hadn't, by the way. I could only spare a couple of hundreds. But I know this chap was in for over a thousand. All the same, he's not my favourite suspect. I told you I had two."

"Who's the other?"

"We'll have to go back a bit. Denver was having a body-and-soul affair with young Barbara, poor little

innocent. Well, now, that kind of girl calls out the protective instinct in some blokes, and in Lucas Mathewson it came out both hot and strong."

"He'd fallen for her himself?"

"And a more unlikely admirer she's probably never had." Pussy frowned. "I don't like this man, but that's not the reason why I want to pin the—the—"

"Murder?" supplied Jerome.

"That's rather a big word—murder."

"Tampering with somebody's aircraft so that he crashes and gets killed—that's rather a big misdemeanour."

Pussy took one hand off the steering wheel to scratch his chin. "Ridding the world of a louse like Denver can't be called murder."

"What would you call it?"

"Pest control? Which is very much in Lucas's line, by the by. He's a fruit farmer engaged in a constant struggle with insect pests."

"Did you ever hear this chap express unfriendly feelings towards Denver?"

"Oh, come off it!" snorted Pussy. "Lucas isn't the type to mince words. He told Denver, more than once, that he'd knock his bloody block off if he didn't leave Barbara alone. He threatened to kill him—that was the word he used. Come to think of it," he added slowly, "his brother did too."

"Whose brother?" Jerome said in perplexity. "Denver's brother?"

"He didn't have a brother, thank God. One of them was enough. I'm talking about Lucas's brother, Bryan Mathewson."

"Ah, Bryan Mathewson," Jerome said, remembering Barbara had mentioned him. "And they both threatened Denver? For the same reason?"

"No, of course not. Ha, if you knew Bryan you'd see how

funny that is! Bryan couldn't be in love with a *wicked* woman like Barbara. Oh, he's a funny little chap. Lives in a private dream. He seems to have only two ambitions—to win the Furniture Exhibit Prize at the British Craftsmen's Exhibition, and to make a cross-Channel sailplane flight."

"Then why did he threaten Denver?"

•"I don't know, I really don't. He seemed to have been getting brewed up for it for quite a while and suddenly it came out. We had a heavy fall of snow here just after Christmas and that brought on a lot of discussion about how to land when you couldn't see the familiar landmarks and so forth —"

"You fly in *snow*?" Jerome said unbelievingly.

"Too true. Makes for nice smooth take-offs and landings. Well, Denver said it would do us Silver C pilots good—make a good introduction to blind flying. We have to do that for flying in thunder cloud conditions—flying by instruments, you understand. Well, he was discussing this—it was actually damned interesting—and he used the expression 'blind flying' several times. All of a sudden, Bryan Mathewson burst out with 'Blind flying—you're well qualified to speak of it because if ever a man was blind, it's you, Denver!' Well, Denver gaped at him and said 'What's wrong with you, little man?' That's what he used to call Bryan, who's only about five feet four. Now I come to think of it, it's enough to get anybody's goat. Bryan sort of crept up to him, peered into his face, and hissed, 'Little, am I? Big enough to close your mouth for you, perhaps forever'."

"But what had brought it on 't couldn't have been the talk about flying, surely?'

"No, he was scarcely paying attention to that. But a lot of us were rather sick of Denver just then. It was the first week in January, and we'd had a bit of a shindig at

the clubhouse for New Year. Denver sat most of it out with Barbara in his car. I mean to say, with Susan there too. . . . Possibly Bryan's moral sense was outraged. He may even be a bit of a crank. He's deep, is Bryan."

"And Lucas?"

"Deep's the last word you'd use for Lucas. He's all on the surface. Shallow and rather stupid, in my opinion. But that doesn't prevent him from being desperately in love with Barbara, which makes him my favourite suspect. He probably got rid of Denver to save little Barbara from his clutches and get her for himself. Added to that, the brothers have money invested in the Pteron, and though it's not what you'd call a vast investment, still to them it would be terribly important. They're neither of them rich. Bryan inherited the family cabinet-making business in Beckenton—that's this little market-town we're just coming into now. Lucas has a fruit farm about a mile further on, a small place—I'd call it a smallholding only he gets offended. He's had it about a year and it's not doing so well, which would make the money even more important."

"You say he's stupid. Could he have carried out this subtle piece of sabotage?"

"He could. He's clever with his hands. But better still, Lucas has access to all sorts of poisons."

"Poisons?"

"For spraying his trees."

"Oh, nonsense. That would have shown up in the autopsy. Nicotine, for instance—I bet it leaves definite signs."

"Yes, but some of these new things? Are you sure a doctor would notice evidence of that kind, if he weren't actually looking for it?"

"It's possible," Jerome said thoughtfully. "Yes, it's possible to make out a good case against Lucas."

"I thought you'd think so," Pussy said, looking pleased. Seeing that expression of self-congratulation, Jerome couldn't help countering with, "But of course an equally good case could be made out against you. And you have the advantage of not being shallow and stupid."

Pussy took his eyes off the road and looked full at him.

"I wonder," he said uneasily, "if it was a good idea to bring you to Mollin Ridge?"

SIX

THE premises of the Mollin Ridge Gliding Club were hardly inspiring. About forty miles from London's south-east suburbs the North Downs shoulder their way across the landscape, and here the R.A.F. had had an aerodrome during World War II. The rightful owner was lucky enough to have his land returned to him within a year of the war's end and put it under the plough at once; but a handful of local gliding enthusiasts had been able to buy a corner of the former airfield and some of the huts left by the Air Force.

These, never elegant, now had a hard-worked air after fifteen years of indifferent maintenance with constant use. One was a very large construction, obviously the hangar; alongside stood a building about half that size, timber built and rather rickety, with a shabby blue tractor squatting by its side. A little distance away stood a long and narrow hut, the kind familiar to Jerome from the dear dead days of his National Service: some elegant nylon washing flirting on a line in the spring breeze proclaimed this to be the women's sleeping hut. Then there was a sort of cabin, by no means unpleasing. More carpentry and painting had been expended on this than on any of the other buildings; it had almost a homely air. A porch had been built on the front, round which some enthusiastic hand had trained a climbing plant. Beyond this, a blot on the landscape, stood that direst of architectural tragedies, a Nissen hut: some inelegant washing drooping on a line outside it proclaimed this to be the men's sleeping hut.

To the west of the buildings rolled a big expanse of grass, hedged with ragged hawthorn. Round it, like quiet

moths at rest, lay the gliders—bright blue, orange, silver, white trimmed with scarlet. The windward wing appeared to be weighted down with a black Pontefract cake, but closer inspection later on showed these to be old tyres. As soon as he saw the gliders, Jerome understood the fascination they had for their pilots; so still and obedient-looking, so finely designed for their own particular tasks, so personally-selected, so *individual*. They had personalities of their own. They scarcely looked like machines at all.

As they turned off the high road running along the ridge of the Downs they lost sight of the field for a while. Then halfway down the lane it came into view again, and Pussy slowed the car so that they could watch a take-off. At the far side of the field, facing into the wind, a blue single-seater was lifting steeply off the grass. If you narrowed your eyes and looked hard, it was just possible to see a fine thread, like a trailing spider's thread, attaching it to a square cage-like thing, which appeared to house a motor; for as it throbbed, the black thread shortened and the glider climbed. When the glider was almost at the top of the arc, the thread dropped back to the earth, and the glider flew away.

"I thought these things were launched by an aeroplane?" Jerome remarked.

"Not here. We can't afford it, except occasionally. It's cheaper by winch. It's like getting a kite into the sky, you know, only instead of a kid with a string we have a winch with a steel cable."

"And how do you get rid of the cable when you want to be on your own?"

"You release it, of course," Pussy said in surprise. "What did you imagine—that we had to stop up there on the end of it, going round and round the winch? Tcha! You'll get a shock when you find out how fine a control we have over

performance and equipment, even though we haven't got a noisy aero-engine!"

As his Ford Zephyr slid to a stop outside the cabin and then backed into the orderly row of parked cars, a girl came out of the hangar.

"Hello there, Barbara!" Pussy called, and added in aside to Jerome, "Don't let on I've spoken to you about her."

"Of course not," Jerome said deceitfully.

She came to the door of the car and watched listlessly as they got out and set their overnight bags down.

"Flying today?" Pussy said. "Seems promising."

"The forecast is 'Bright later'. I don't know that I'll fly, though. I promised to help Jane with the new curtains for the dining-room."

"We have to do everything by ourselves," Pussy explained to Jerome. "No funds for regular domestic staff. Besides, nobody in the village wants a job here. Too far to come." He turned back to Barbara to introduce Jerome. Barbara acknowledged the introduction with a disinterested nod. "Any tea going, Barbara?"

"Not unless someone's volunteered to make it. If Richie were here he'd have organized it but now he's gone--"

"Everything's come to a stop?"

She smiled. "You hate to admit he was the main driving force behind this gliding club."

"Have it your own way," Pussy told her wearily, and led Jerome towards the cabin. "I wish she didn't keep picking at me," he muttered. "One day I'll lose my temper and tell her what I really thought of that two-timing bastard, and I don't want to do that—it would shrivel her up, poor kid."

The cabin was the clubhouse. There was a small lounge immediately inside the door, and beyond that the dining-

room from which came the sound of a table-tennis ball being batted back and forth. The dining-room was used as games-room when not in use for meals. Beyond this again was the kitchen. The accommodation was very limited even for the number Jerome reckoned to be here today, a cool, showery spring day. What things must be like in high summer, when holidays freed the majority of members for flying, was unimaginable. But already he could sense the comradeship that made light of the difficulties. In their way, they were a close-knit community friendly to outsiders, tolerant of those who didn't share their enthusiasm, but reserving real friendship for their fellow-pilots.

Barbara came in just behind them. Jerome turned just in time to help her off with her duffle coat and give her a friendly wink. She was revealed as wearing a black sweater over an orange silk shirt and Black Watch tartan trews. The effect of that bright touch of colour at her throat was so good that Jerome wished he could see her in some gay party dress. Poor kid. Now, when she was twenty and at her prettiest, she was wasting it all on the memory of a man who, by Pussy's account, was decidedly not worth it.

A thick-set man by the window, reading "Aviation Magazine," gave her a low wolf whistle of appreciation for the svelte lines of the trews. She glanced at him, didn't smile. Sighing, he went back to his reading. Then he flung it down and rose, stretching. " 'Lo, Puss. Not a bad week-end coming up, by the looks of it. The log book's pretty full already. You taking your Ollie?"

"Tomorrow, I hope. I've got odd jobs to do today. You flying?"

"I'm waiting my turn. That's the worst of just being a peasant with a share in a syndicate machine. This hanging around is summink crool."

"Why don't you bring something to keep you occupied while you wait?" said a quiet voice from the corner.

Jerome glanced round. The speaker was a man who had that inescapable resemblance to the other that family relationship gives. They weren't alike; one was thick and rough-hewn, rather like an English Jean Gabin but with a hooked nose: the other was slighter, more finely built, and with features too nondescript to have a nose that you noticed, hooked or otherwise. Yet clearly they were brothers, and it needed no necromancy to tell that the first speaker was Lucas Mathewson, and the man seated in the corner working on some small piece of carving was Bryan.

"Like you, you mean?" Lucas returned. "Listen, Bryan my boy, if you slaved every day on five acres of unrewarding fruit trees, you'd want to relax when you had the chance."

"Maybe you think I don't work in the shop?"

"I didn't say that. But cabinet-making can't be so exhausting as pumping lime-and-sulphur wash over fruit trees, and besides you can sit down any time you want. Now me, I've got to be outdoors in the wind — and that reminds me, Pussy, come in and close that bloody door. The draught's bad for my rheumatism!"

Pussy obliged and introduced Jerome. Bryan gave him a brief though friendly nod and at once went back to his handiwork. Jerome saw that he was making a chessman out of a piece of a beautiful yellow wood, and even from several yards away the charm of the design and the excellence of the workmanship were evident. He crossed to lean forward and examine it.

"You don't mind if I watch you work?"

"Oh . . . no . . . if you're interested." The other's stiff-bladed knife gleamed in the diffused light within the room. "My hobby, you know."

"That's a beautiful piece of work. Is it your own design?"

"Oh . . . yes . . . I work with wood, you see. It's my trade." There was a curious, almost stammering hesitancy in his speech, as if he wished he needn't speak at all. He was much less likely to attract attention than his brother, who was restless and energetic while Bryan was restrained —too restrained, probably. "This is satinwood. Lovely, isn't it? Comes up beautifully when it's polished."

"How many pieces have you done so far?"

"This is the last. I've done all the black set—in ebony. This is the last of the white."

Jerome was hoping to be offered the chance of holding the piece in his hand so as to appreciate the smooth wood. But Bryan held it cupped carefully, quite close to his chest. So far not much more than the outline had been achieved. It was a figure in swathed robes, not much like the loose folds of the usual chess figure: more oriental, he guessed—Indian or Persian in inspiration, perhaps. There was something familiar about the figure. He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. He waited a moment for Bryan to speak again, but in vain. The carver became intent on his work.

The door at the end of the room opened and a woman came through, carrying on her arm a set of cotton print curtains and in her hand a paper bag. She held these out towards Barbara Haskell, moving her hand to make the contents of the bag jingle. "You promised you'd help sew on these curtain rings, Barbara."

She was introduced as Jane Osbertson, wife of Alan Osbertson the club chairman. Her manner bordered on the magisterial but there was some justification for this, for Jerome soon discovered that she was the mainspring of the organization. It was she who kept track of the beds booked and available, who ordered the food for the

weekend, who cooked and served it with only occasional voluntary help. She it was who had trained the climbing rose on the verandah. She had a high colour and a firm mouth, and her fifty years had given her a certain shrewdness which took the place of actual wisdom. She waited with a "now come along, no nonsense" air until Barbara had accepted her share of the sewing, then sat down beside her to begin on it.

"Are you staying overnight, Mr. Aylwin? Pussy, bring the blankets from the men's dormie into the kitchen, will you? I'm sure they need airing. I wish we could get proper heating in the dormies—it is so worrying, all that damp in the air. You two boys aren't staying?"

The Mathewsons said they were not.

"Piglet is, and you two—that makes three—and those two German visitors, and old Chev too, I think, and of course Alan. Are you going to learn, Mr. Aylwin?"

"Learn?" he echoed, momentarily wandering. "Oh, to fly? I'm thinking about it."

"You'll find you have to put up with a lot of discomforts and disappointments. So often the weather in this country isn't suitable and then all the poor dears can do is sit around wasting time."

Something in the pitying tone of "the poor dears" made Jerome say, "You're not a flier yourself?"

"Oh dear me no. My husband is the flier and one in the family is quite enough. It's not exactly a cheap hobby, you know, and besides someone has to do the donkey work. Someone has to do the retrieving, for instance."

"I understand that when you bring a glider back from a long flight, you take it to pieces and stow it in a trailer—like those parked at the back of the hangar, I suppose."

"I was just going to tell you about it," she said, fixing him with a reproving eye. "The retrieving team has to do

all that--de-rig the glider and load it in the trailer, and then rig it when it's needed again."

"But how does it all fit together when it's rigged for flight?"

"With bolts and pins, of course."

"And you can take it to pieces easily?"

"Naturally, otherwise how would you get it de-rigged when you were miles away from the home hangar? You disconnect the controls, usually elevator, ailerons, and airbrakes, in that order. Then you take off the tailplane and then the wings. I hate doing the wings--they're so big and unwieldy and it needs about three people to help while you get the main root pins out."

"You really mean you unpin the wings? Just like that?" Jerome asked, with visions of an incorrectly rigged sailplane coming apart in mid-air.

"Oh indeed yes. It would need only a moment's carelessness--"

"Or a moment's ill-intention," Barbara put in suddenly, raising her eyes from her needle.

Jerome looked past Jane, and Barbara's gaze met his, questioning and intent. Other members drifted in from various non-flying occupations, clearly in expectation of lunch. Jane said, "I'll just go and peep at the hot-pot to make sure it's all right. Perhaps you'd like to go and leave your things in the dormie? It's the Nissen--"

"I'll show him." Barbara said, jumping up because she saw that Lucas Mathewson was preparing to take the seat beside her that Jane had vacated.

They went out of the clubhouse together. Barbara said, "What Jane was telling you is true. It would be easy to leave a bolt unfastened or something of that sort. But you'll find out that we're not quite so casual as all that. There are checks on the aircraft before it leaves the ground. I'm just saying this so that you won't think the crash was

caused by something so incredible as the wing falling off in mid-air."

Jerome was close enough to the Nissen hut to see the spartan accommodation it offered. He groaned. "What have I let myself in for?" he demanded.

"Poor man. Never mind—drop your bag on a bed and come back to the cabin. The bar opens for half an hour before lunch."

"Half an hour? Is that all?"

"Well, we have to find volunteers to act barman, and that's as long as anybody will serve."

When they got back to the cabin the fliers also had gathered. "Just look at them," Jane said with a tolerant smile, "waiting with their tongues hanging out for Alan to open the bar."

Prompt on that cue her husband came in, a harassed man in an ex-R.A.F. flying suit, with a great many more wrinkles on his forehead than hairs on his head. He went to a corner, unlocked a home-made sliding door which screened it off, and began dispensing drinks from a tiny bar thus disclosed. Jerome asked the two women what they would like.

"You can't buy," Pussy interposed. "You're not a member. I'll get them." He went to the bar and queued up behind two others who were chaffing Osbertson while they waited.

"Why don't you sell that old crate and buy a horse and cart?"

"You aren't really going to explore the Grampians in that thing next summer?"

"Let me tell you," Osbertson said, going pink, "my Weihc may be old--"

"But it's honest. Cheer up, Alan," cried Pussy, "you'll get your Diamond in it yet."

Everybody laughed. This seemed to be a long-standing

joke. Alan Osbertson went pinker yet and said, without the least amusement, "We can't all afford to build high-performance gliders to our own design, like some members."

"Late members, you mean," put in Lucas. "And don't forget whose money it was he used."

An awful silence fell. Alan coughed and poured drinks rather unsteadily. Lucas, seeing he'd dropped a brick, produced a pack of cards from the pocket of his tweed jacket.

"Who wants to see my latest mystification?" he inquired of all and sundry. "Nothing up my sleeve, ladies and gentlemen, no cards concealed. Choose—"

Barbara suddenly leapt to her feet. "Card tricks! Haven't you any heart, any memory, any feelings? Have you forgotten last time you amused us with your silly card tricks?"

She ran out, trampling the newly sewn curtains underfoot as she went and sending flying the drink Pussy was holding out to her. Everybody was held in a moment's frozen animation, then Lucas went plunging after her, scattering the cards.

"Barbara! I'm sorry! Barbara, you know I wouldn't do anything to upset you—" The rest of his words were lost as he ran across to the hangar, where she had disappeared.

Those left in the clubhouse looked at one another in embarrassment and then began to chat busily. Jane Osbertson said in a pitying, patronising tone, "She'll have to get used to it some day."

"I'm afraid I didn't understand what that was all about," Jerome murmured.

"The day Richie Denver crashed, Lucas was showing us a new card trick. In fact at the actual moment when Richie was launched to go straight to his death, we were

all standing around Lucas laughing at him, just as we were now."

"But why is Barbara so upset? She in particular?" he queried, wishing to hear the view of a quick-witted woman such as Jane.

"I'd think you could guess. She and Richie were—you know."

"Oh, I see."

"One mustn't speak ill, of course, but really Richie treated Susan abominably. If it had been me, I'd have cracked down on him for a divorce. But Susan's such a dear."

"I've met Mrs. Denver. She's a wonderfully attractive girl. It seems incredible that—"

"—A man could prefer someone else? Yes, quite, I do agree, but then you know they'd been married four years and Richie was always the restless type. Oh, not riotous living or anything like that," Jane interjected with the air of one who would give the devil his due. "He didn't care for high society or wine, women and song—which strange as it may seem may have been one of the causes for their drifting apart. Susan enjoys entertaining and the social round. Now when you're married to a man who's devoted heart and soul to gliding, you tend to spend more of your time in draughty hangars or driving the trailer down cart tracks than in night clubs."

"But Susan didn't have to do it if she didn't want to—"

"Huh!" Jane grunted. "That's what you think. Richie was the kind of man you can't say no to. At first, of course, poor Susan thought it was marvellous fun—but then the glamour began to wear off, as it does." She sighed. "I know, I've been through it. And for Susan, it was by then too late to try to go back among the friends she used to know from the rather upper-crust days in Switzerland; Richie'd got through her money. My dear, she bore it

like an angel! Never a word of complaint. I used to pray that Richie would make a go of his new sailplane, if only to make life a bit easier for Susan. Things may work out all right, though; Alan says they've got a committee formed from the people who invested money in the Pteron, and they're going to pull things round."

"A lot of people had money invested?"

"Oh yes, quite a few. Let me see. There was Susan, naturally--most of her money went on the try-out designs for the Pteron. My husband loaned Richie a fair sum, and so did old Chev. Then Charles Aspinall and his wife—poor things, I do hope they see some of their money back because they've got three children and another on the way. The two Mathewsons. . . . How many's that?"

"Seven, if you count the Aspinalls as two," said Jerome, who had been keeping careful count.

"Then there's one more. Oh, Pussy, of course."

"These seven people stand more chance of getting their money now that Denver's dead, you might say."

"You might," she agreed rather tartly.

"You know I came down with Pussy," Jerome confided. "He was telling me that there's been quite a bit of talk—"

"Pussy seems to think he's the only one who's suffered in that way," she interrupted with irritation. "He seems to forget my poor husband."

"Your husband?"

"Some peasants are saying that the glider was tampered with, quite disregarding the fact that my husband examined that wreckage. My goodness, he's been in gliding for thirty years. If he doesn't know all there is to know about a glider, who does?"

He nodded as if in agreement. "So it must have been an accident due to lack of judgment on Denver's part."

"No-o," she said unwillingly. "I couldn't in honesty say I think that. If you take up this sport, Jerome, and get

fairly advanced, you'll realize it's awfully difficult to crash a glider in good gliding conditions. If you *do* make a mistake, the glider gives you time to rectify it, as a rule."

"Then if it wasn't due to a mistake on Denver's part, and there was nothing wrong with the machine, what then?"

She smiled, enjoying the surprise she was going to cause.

"What about something wrong with the pilot?"

"You mean, illness?"

"Suppose he'd been given something—just something to make him feel muzzy?"

"But surely—"

"It wouldn't have been difficult." Her eyes ranged the club lounge, in which there were at present fourteen people. "Look at those drinks left standing about. Richie was just the same. It would have been easy just to slip something in."

"But he wouldn't have flown if he wasn't feeling fit?"

"Perhaps the drug wouldn't take effect until some minutes afterwards. A sleeping pill, for instance—it doesn't put you to sleep instantaneously."

"But suppose Denver hadn't gone out on this flight when he did?"

"Then he'd have felt drowsy and taken a nap here in the clubhouse—why not? But slipping in a flight between his aperitif and his lunch was a wellknown habit of Richie's. He did a lot of odd-job flying for the club—check-flying if some peasant complained of a fault, test-flying for C. of A. So as not to waste flying opportunities he'd often slip in a flight on a machine he was testing. That was what he was doing when he died—fitting in a test flight on the Polaris before he had his lunch. We all knew he was going to do it because we needed the Polaris back in circulation for club flying."

"I'm afraid there's a lot there that mystifies me. What's C. of A., for instance?"

"Certificate of Airworthiness. Once a year every glider is thoroughly checked and then test flown to prove airworthiness. The Polaris was a rather elderly glider—quite a good one, but designs are tidier now—and it was being flown so as to get it available for club members. It belonged to the club. Everybody was interested in seeing it back in service, and everybody knew Richie was going to take it up before lunch that Saturday. A lot of peasants were planning to get tuition on that same glider in the afternoon."

"I see."

"Why are you asking all these questions anyway?" she said with sudden sharpness.

"I'm interested, naturally. Think what it would mean to Susan to learn that someone actually meant harm to her husband."

"If Susan only knew it, someone's done her a good turn."

"You mean you really believe that a crime's been committed and you're willing to condone it?"

"Condone it, yes indeed, I'm prepared to condone it. I'm glad someone had the pluck to do it! And I'm not the only one who's glad. I could name half a dozen who feel the same."

"Tell me their names," he cajoled.

"Why should I?"

"It will be interesting to look around and try to guess if they're not only glad he's gone but helped him go."

"I'm sure one of them did. But I'm also sure it will never be proved."

"You mean you think you know someone who's committed the perfect murder?"

"Well, although I think Lucas Mathewson would

gladly have strangled Richie, I think this method of getting rid of him is a bit too clever for him. But his brother is brainier—and he's capable of deep resentment. Then Pussy, of course—Pussy is the most obvious suspect because he's clever enough to have thought of this idea of rendering Richie unconscious while flying. Another person who was angry enough to have done it was Vivian Haskell, Barbara's father—but he couldn't have used the drugged drink method because he wasn't in the club lounge before lunch. Still, he might have thought of some other idea. I'm not saying *my* idea about how it was done is right in every detail."

"Well, that's four. You offered me half a dozen."

"My husband and myself make up the number."

"There you are!" Jerome laughed. "Now I know you were joking."

"Oh no," she said calmly. "Richie's death was pre-arranged and one of those I've named was responsible."

SEVEN

THE lunch was as surprisingly good as food often is when cooked by keen English non-professionals. Hearing volunteers called for to help with the washing-up—dirty crockery for nearly a score, no small chore—Jerome offered. But Jane, in charge of domestic arrangements, excused him on the grounds that he was a guest. He got the impression that she was really anxious not to have him close by. Perhaps she was sorry she had said so much to him in the warmth engendered by gin-and-Italian.

“What are you going to do now, Pussy?”

“That depends on you. I’ve put your name down on the list for a flight in the trainer but you’re a long way down. What would you like to do while you wait?”

“Could I come with you and see what you get up to? Or should I be in the way?”

“Not the least, but I’m afraid you may find it a bit boring. I’ve got a repair job on hand. This way.”

Jerome followed him across the grass. They stopped to watch the trainer slip across the field and then, lifting its nose towards the sky flecked with clouds, strain at the cable until it found freedom.

Parked along the rear wall of the hangar was a double row of enormous trailers, each of them about thirty feet long and most of them bearing an advertisement for a wellknown bedtime drink. “To think,” Jerome murmured, “that on the rare occasions when I saw one of these vehicles, I imagined it to be full of malt, eggs, and sugar for the factory.”

Pussy chuckled. “Now you’ll know it’s full of glider. The firm pay a yearly rent for the use of the advertising space, which is a useful addition to income for some of the more

penurious peasants. But you see I withstood the temptation—I'm too genteel. The blue one's mine. Hi, you peasants, lend a hand here, will you?"

Two men left off their scrutiny of the trainer's flight and came to the doors of the trailer. Inside the sailplane was stowed in four main pieces: the two wings, the fuselage, and the tailplane section, with various smaller sections which Jerome couldn't recognize. They manhandled the fuselage out on to the grass and then took it into the repair shed, where they lovingly deposited it on a trestle. One of the "peasants" — this, Jerome had discovered, was a term applied to lesser or junior members of the club— took his leave. The other lingered.

"What you going to do, Puss?"

"Tidy up the wiring on the instrument panel. Want to help? By the way, this is Jerome Aylwin. Jerome—Piglet."

Piglet wore heavy executive-type glasses sadly out of keeping with his immature body.

"You're not what I expected," Jerome told him. "I thought you'd be plump."

"Me? How on earth did you ever come to hear of me?"

"Don't be alarmed," Pussy said. "I haven't told him your dreadful secret."

"I haven't got one," Piglet said nervously.

"Pussy was saying you were there when Denver took off that last day."

"Oh, that. I see." Unexpectedly Piglet took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. "It always makes me feel like bursting into tears when I'm reminded of it. I know he was a blasted nuisance, but by God he was a flier. If I'd known old man Haskell was going to cut up rough I'd have shoved him off ages before, but I didn't know and there you are."

"But you really feel that incident had nothing to do with the crash?"

"With the crash? Of course not."

"Haskell hit Denver, I hear."

"Tried to. Denver just swayed out of range and pushed the old chap off."

"And he was perfectly all right when he got into his aircraft?"

"Right as rain. In fact he caught my eye and gave me the old high-sign."

Well, that disposed of physical violence from Vivian Haskell as the cause of the accident. Jerome stood by with his hands in his pockets, watching the two enthusiasts carefully unscrew the instrument panel to reveal a maze of wires.

"Suppose anything went wrong with the instruments?" he ventured.

"Suppose it did? You can manage very nicely with your eyes and ears unless you're in cloud."

"Was Denver in cloud the day he crashed?"

"Not he. Cloud was at four thousand and he never went above fifteen hundred."

Jerome sighed and produced his cigarette case.

"No Smoking!" Piglet cried in alarm, almost giving the capitals by his tone of voice. "Can't you read?"

"No, fair's fair, Piglet, the door was stood back so that the sign isn't visible. Sorry, Jerome, no smoking. The stuff we use for making the fabric taut over the airframe is a petrol derivative."

"In that case you won't mind if I leave you to it and find a place where I can have a cigarette? See you later."

Outside he saw Barbara getting into a very smart Jaguar sports car. Lucas was sprinting across from the men's dormie to speak to her and she was clearly deter-

mined not to see him. Instead she chose to see Jerome. "Want a lift?" she called. "I'm going into Mollin village, if it's any use to you."

"Thanks, I'm going to need more cigarettes." He climbed in beside her and off they went, with Lucas still some yards out of range.

"Hello, stranger," she said. "Don't you think I acted my part very well?"

"Very well indeed."

"What conclusion have you come to?"

"One thing you told me has proved to be true. You're not the only person who thinks Richard Denver didn't die accidentally."

"I knew that would strike you. Have you had any thoughts about who is responsible?"

"It stands out a mile that you suspect Pussy. But he's not by any means the only suspect, Barbara. However, let's consider Pussy. How do you think he could have brought the accident about?"

"I'm not a very advanced pilot myself and so probably I've only arrived at the simplest method. And remember I told you, it had to be something that would pass the routine cockpit check before take-off. You've seen the gliders at close quarters. Have you noticed the steel cable wire which runs from the cockpit controls to the control surfaces?"

"I've seen steel cable wires going along the side of some of the gliders, from the cockpit or thereabouts to the wings and the tail."

"You've noticed that on some of the gliders they're on the outside, and easily get-at-able?"

"I have indeed." He nodded. "What you're about to tell me is that on the glider Richie was flying the day he crashed, the control cables were on or near the surface of the aircraft, and you think Pussy got at them with a file."

Presumably he would fray them sufficiently to part if the glider was under a sudden strain, but not sufficiently to give way under the easy conditions of the cockpit check. Yes?"

"Yes."

"And such a break in the cables could be thought to have happened at the moment of the crash?"

"Alan probably thought so."

"It sounds a reasonable theory, but I've had others suggested to me —theories which wouldn't cast aspersions on Alan's expertise or integrity."

"From Jane, I bet. She keeps harping on about Richie having been drugged. That's because she'd rather not believe Alan missed a defect in the Polaris—or, worse still, *didn't* miss it."

"You don't think the drug theory is feasible?"

"Well Jerome," she said unwillingly, "you must have heard about the quarrel between my father and Richie just before the take-off. It doesn't sound from that as if Richie was suffering from the effects of any drug. I know," she added, as Jerome was about to interrupt, "Jane wants us to believe that the drug didn't take effect until he was airborne. But could a dosage be so nicely judged? And wouldn't it have been noticed at the autopsy?"

"Did anyone at the inquest ask if there had been evidence of a drug?"

"No, because don't you see, Jerome, we were all so stunned at the accident and overcome with the various emotions we felt that we didn't get our brains working again until days after. Then, of course, I was the only person who wanted to pursue the topic. Everybody else was only too glad to let things lie."

"I don't think that's exactly true. I've heard one or two people express uneasiness, because their own lives are being affected by the suspicion."

"But they'd still rather leave it at the official verdict—Accidental Death."

"You really are totally convinced it couldn't have been an accident?"

"Pilots like Richie don't have accidents in good gliding conditions while flying the kind of glider they could handle with their eyes shut. In aerobatics, yes; in competition flying, perhaps; in strange conditions in a strange country, possibly: but not on a little routine check-up flight before lunch from an airfield like Mollin. It's like saying a man could lose his way between the front door and his favourite arm chair. When you've flown once or twice, Jerome, you'll realize that a glider is a fundamentally *safe* aircraft. Leave it alone and it'll fly itself—the pundits are always saying that to us learners, and it's true. The glider will practically fly itself if it's airworthy. And the Polaris was air-worthy because it had just come out of the workshop after check-up."

"Who did the check-up?"

"Alan Osbertson and Richie. That was usual. The pundits do the check-up for C. of A. and then one of them test-flies the machine to make sure everything's in order."

"Barbara, do you know what you're saying?" Jerome said in alarm. "You're saying that Osbertson helped check the glider before the flight and again after the crash. If anyone had a chance to tamper with it, it was Alan Osbertson!"

Barbara's face clouded. "Not Alan," she objected.

"You'd rather not have Alan as First Murderer?"

"Well, he's a bit of a bore with his determination to get a Diamond and his long involved stories about his tea importing business, but he's rather sweet."

"Listen, Barbara, you can't choose. If we find that a crime really has been committed, it makes no difference

whether you're fond of the criminal or not. I can't promise to prove it was Pussy."

"No, I see that."

"Would you rather we let the whole thing slide?"

"No!" she cried vehemently. "I've got to know."

"Very well then. But if it's someone other than Pussy?"

"I still want to know. You said you had another likely suspect."

"Yes, I've got three in all now." Pussy, Alan Osbertson, and Lucas Mathewson.

"Oh damn," she exclaimed, glancing in her driving mirror and then looking back along the road. "We're being followed."

Jerome did as she had done and observed a not very new Landrover bouncing along in their wake a couple of hundred yards away. He was just about to ask who it was when to his surprise Barbara turned into a cart track leading to a field gate and pulled up with a jerk. Flinging her arms round him, she kissed him soundly.

This was by no means unpleasant. After the first moment of amazement Jerome co-operated wholeheartedly and was only half aware when the Landrover rumbled by on the main road. As soon as it was gone, however, Barbara pushed Jerome off, smoothed her hair, scrubbed her lips with her handkerchief, and gave a little laugh of triumph.

"Perhaps now he'll stop running after me."

"Who? Do you mean that delightful interlude was only make-believe for someone else's benefit?"

"It was Lucas Mathewson. He was following us."

Oh, fine. A man who might have killed Richie Denver for playing around with Barbara's affections!

EIGHT

"ARE you really going into Mollin or was that just an excuse to get away from Lucas?"

"No, that was quite genuine. My father may be coming down for the weekend." She hesitated. "I haven't exactly been on friendly terms with Daddy since Richie died. He's been sending me imploring cables from Australia—he had to rush off there immediately after the inquest—well, anyhow, he's home today and sent me word he'd come down to Mollin. I suppose he wants us to kiss and make up."

"Perhaps you could just set me down here, then, Barbara. I don't really need cigarettes, you know."

"Oh, do come in to Mollin with me. Lucas is almost sure to be lying in wait for me at The Silent Woman—he knows I'm putting up there. Please, Jerome. If you're with me he won't try to grab me."

But she was wrong in thinking Jerome's presence would deter Lucas. As they drew up under the ominous inn sign of a beheaded woman, the thickset figure descended on them.

"I want to talk to you," he announced curtly. "Alone."

"Then you've chosen the wrong moment, haven't you?" she replied with coldness.

"This isn't the moment of my choosing. If you'd stop running away from me, I'd get a chance to speak."

"I'm sorry, Lucas, I'm rather in a hurry at the moment."

"In a hurry! You've got the whole blasted weekend ahead of you and you can't spare me thirty seconds!"

"You've taken up more than thirty seconds with this argument already. Wouldn't it be better to say what you want to say, if it's important?"

"I—I'm not good at apologizing in front of an audience."

"Apologizing?" She was surprised.

"I just wanted to say I was sorry about that business with the cards at lunchtime. I never dreamed it would upset you. You know I wouldn't upset you for the world."

Softened, she took a small step towards him. "It's all right, Lucas. I was a fool to break out the way I did."

"Don't you think it's time you stopped brooding over all that, though?"

That was a mistake, thought Jerome, seeing how she stiffened at the criticism.

"I don't think it's any business of yours," she returned. "How I feel and what I do are my own affair."

"It's a blasted funny thing to me," Lucas flashed, "that you can be so grieved and upset about Denver and yet go canoodling in your car with the first Johnny-come-lately!"

"If you didn't follow me about you wouldn't have things like that to worry about," she said, with the cruelty that women can show to men they dislike. "And if that's all, may I go now?"

"No, by God!"

As she made to move past him, his hand, broad and stained with chemicals, closed fiercely over her arm. He dragged at her. Naturally she resisted. The backward pull caused her to stumble a little. She gave a little cry of mingled pain and alarm.

Before he knew what he was doing Jerome had chopped the edge of his hand down hard on Lucas's forearm. As the momentary paralysis of the nerves caused the hand to release its hold on Barbara, she drew free. Lucas made a grab at her with his other hand. Jerome hit him, once and scientifically, just below the left ear.

He went sprawling sideways. A couple of men, emerging from the inn doorway, helped him to his feet. Growling, he shook them off and made for Jerome.

Barbara slipped in between, almost weeping with distress.

"Lucas, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Please don't fight about it. I was horrid to you."

"Don't want him to get hurt, is that it?"

"You shouldn't 'a' done that to the young lady, lad," one of the bystanders reproached him.

"Keep your big fat face out of it!" roared Lucas, turning on him.

Jerome saw it was likely to become a free fight, because Lucas couldn't climb down without making himself look foolish in front of Barbara.

"Hop it, Barbara, there's a good girl."

"But—"

"I'll deal with him, I promise."

Looking very like a guilty schoolgirl, she scuttled into The Silent Woman.

"You shouldn't 'a' hit him, though," said the judicial bystander, to Jerome this time.

"I know I shouldn't. Keep off, you damned fool," he added as Lucas caught hold of his jacket. "We're making an exhibition of ourselves."

"If I was you," said the bystander, "I'd shake hands and go and 'ave a pot of beer. Just got time before Bill puts up the shutters for the afternoon." Although his manner was irritating, he had a great deal of sense, because as he spoke he was restraining Lucas's attempts to hit Jerome yet without making much fuss about it. And the suggestion was a good one.

"Come on, Lucas --what do you say?"

"I don't want to drink with you, you bastard."

"Nay, don't talk like that, lad. Beer's beer, whoever buys it."

"Well said," Jerome agreed, grinning. "And listen to me, Lucas Mathewson—I've got some information

you'll be glad to hear, if you'll stop trying to lay me flat long enough to listen."

"Lay you flat? It was you who laid me flat. Think I'm going to let you get away with that? You'll be sorry, don't think you won't."

"I'm sorry already. I'll apologize if you will."

"I wouldn't apologize to you—"

"Apologize to Barbara, then. You really scared her, Lucas."

Lucas began to look ashamed. "We-ell, I—"

"Beer's good here," put in the bystander cheerfully.

Lucas allowed himself to be steered towards the entrance of the inn. The two men left them there and without further trouble Jerome and Lucas found themselves in the four-ale bar. Jerome bought the beer and pushed one glass towards Lucas. Lucas glowered at it, glowered at Jerome, and growled, "Well?"

"It's no good forcing your attentions on Barbara when she's so obviously not ready for that sort of thing so soon after—"

He was interrupted by a tirade of profanity, which ended in "And if she's not ready for that sort of thing, what the hell were you and her doing back up the road there?"

"Putting up a smokescreen."

"Eh?" Lucas said, absolutely at a loss.

"She saw you in the driving mirror, pulled up, and staged the love scene. It was to make you stop bothering her."

"I didn't see you protesting any!"

"Would you?" asked Jerome. "Oh, come on, Lucas, be a bit sensible. Do you really think Barbara's the kind of girl who'd throw herself at a man she only met three days ago?"

Lucas moved his glass about on the bar top, making a ring pattern like the Olympic games sign. "She wouldn't even talk to me. But she seems pally enough with you."

"But don't you see that's because I'm not making any demands on her emotions?"

"It's all right for you. You can afford to take it slow and easy because you can see her in London. But look at me, tied down here, sweating in the blasted orchard, getting myself stained and smelly with insecticides, and earning less in a year than her old man earns in a week."

"Money's got nothing to do with it. Denver had no money yet she fell for him hook, line and glider."

"Oh, Barbara thought he was all the Knights of the Round Table rolled into one." Lucas took a thoughtful swig at the beer. "Queer that an intelligent girl should be taken in so completely. Queer that she still clings to that view, even now when folk are expressing themselves pretty freely about Denver."

"They're also expressing themselves freely about the way he died."

"I've heard them," he shrugged. "Bloody silly, I call it. Whichever way you look at it, he died of a fractured skull in a glider crash."

"But how do you suppose the glider came to crash?"

"How the hell do I know? And anyhow, what's it matter to you?"

"Doesn't matter a bit. If Barbara could only get all her suspicions cleared from her mind it would be a help to her, though."

"Suspicions? Does Barbara—?"

"Yes, she does. Good God, man, don't tell me it hasn't occurred to you that half her trouble is caused by a belief that Denver was murdered?"

"Murdered," Lucas repeated, but not as though the idea shocked him. "Some of the old hens—both male and female—have been tossing that idea around. But nobody takes it seriously."

"Oh yes—Barbara."

"Come off it. How is it supposed to have been done?"

"I don't think she's entirely clear about that. What do you think? Do you think it was an accident?"

Lucas finished his drink. "No," he said slowly. "I don't think it was an accident. I think he killed himself."

This possibility had crossed Jerome's mind once or twice already but it was the first time any other person had suggested it. "Have you any reason to think he'd do a thing like that?"

"Actually there's a lot 'for' and 'against,'" Lucas said, all his truculence gone. "'Against': he was the kind of chap who enjoyed life. You can't imagine him opting out. And if he had been planning doing away with himself, you'd think he'd leave a note. But maybe he wasn't planning it. Maybe it just came to him, suddenly, up there. . . ." He nodded at the rectangle of sky shining through the mullioned windows of *The Silent Woman*. "You know, you get funny ideas sometimes, when you look down and see the earth spread out beneath you like a quiet tapestry. You sometimes get the most godawful feeling of not mattering. I mean, one human life more or less in the scheme of things—who the hell cares?"

"And you think this feeling hit Denver?"

"He'd got troubles, you know. He and Susan didn't hit it off any more. His fault entirely. You can take my word for that, too, because I'm one of the few blokes that know her who can believe Susan Denver capable of having faults." He screwed up one eye and looked at Jerome. "You've met her," he stated.

"I have."

"Thought so from the dreamy look you got when I began talking about her. I don't know why she gets some blokes that way. I mean, damn it, she's a good scout, none better—I'd do anything for our Susan. But why do folk drool over her? Even old Osbertson goes all flustered when she smiles at him. Still, I agree with the general opinion. Denver didn't give her a square deal."

"But viewed in that way, Susan seems to be the one with the grudge against life. It still doesn't explain why Denver should feel like suicide."

"Don't forget, there was Barbara too." His mouth tightened. "He'd got himself into a lovely mess there. I think he spun her the old mullarkey—'My wife doesn't understand me'. Now Barbara's—well, she's wonderful and all that, but she hadn't enough experience to see through him. The thing got terribly serious, from her side at least."

"But that still doesn't—"

"Wait, I'm coming to it. Barbara's rich. At least, that's what Denver thought. Actually it's her old man that's got the dough, and that was where Denver's plan came unstuck. She couldn't get money to invest in the Pteron without asking 'Daddy'. I think she asked him, and Daddy came out to the club that Saturday."

"I heard about that."

"From Piglet. Right. Then you know it wasn't a friendly chat they had. Denver must have realized he wasn't going to get a crooked sixpence out of Daddy."

"And you think he just suddenly felt overwhelmed with despair?"

"It could have happened like that, couldn't it? He really was in a mess, honestly. He was facing bankruptcy, and a lot of chaps would have given him the cold shoulder if that had happened. You see, it was our money he'd

thrown down the drain. If you want to know what I think, Aylwin, I think he couldn't face it any more. He couldn't face us, his creditors; he couldn't face Papa Haskell and, most of all, he couldn't face Barbara. Because if Papa Haskell wasn't going to fork out, Denver wanted to be shut of Barbara. And Barbara wouldn't be so easy to get shut of."

"How can you be sure he didn't really care for Barbara? Her version is that he was deeply in love with her but that Susan wouldn't divorce him."

"Christ, what a tale!" exclaimed Lucas in a shout of laughter. "I'll lay you ten to one he never mentioned divorce to Susan. Why, that's the oldest gag in the book —'My wife won't divorce me'. Susan would have agreed. Why not? The marriage had withered away in any case, and she's no dog in the manger. I don't believe he ever said a word to her about divorce. He was just stringing poor little Barbara a yarn."

"You really had a low opinion of him, didn't you."

"If you want to know, I hated his guts."

"And so say all of you," Jerome murmured. "At least, more or less. A man with so many ill-wishers dies in an air crash, rather convenient! Barbara may have grounds for wondering if anyone had ordered the flowers for the funeral well in advance. Just as a matter of interest, it would be easy to mess up the controls of a glider so that it wouldn't fly?"

"Easy as pie. But then you couldn't get it off the ground.

"But suppose the sabotage had been done so deftly that the damage didn't become effective until the glider was under flying conditions?"

Lucas thought for a while and then slowly nodded. "I can think of, say, three ways of short-stopping the Polaris. But in each case, Aylwin, enough control would be left to

enable a pilot of Denver's ability to land the aircraft."

"Without brakes, for instance? Suppose the brakes had been tampered with?"

"Dammit, man, it's only relatively recently gliders have had airbrakes! Besides, if it was the airbrakes that went wrong, he'd have crashed on landing at the *airfield*—if he was such a dope he couldn't land without airbrakes, I mean."

"Without rudder control?"

"More difficult without rudder control, but I think he could still have done it. Word of honour, Aylwin, Denver could have landed the Polaris if he'd wanted to - I'm convinced of it. You'd have to make out a case that all controls failed completely, and within the short time limits between take-off and crash that isn't possible—especially in those flying conditions."

"It was a good day?"

"One of those cool, gusty spring days - a wonderful day for soaring in the ridge wave. If the controls suddenly became entirely U.S., I could understand he might be in considerable trouble, because the air in the ridge wave tends to be a little bit variable when the wind is gusty. But I've been gliding six years now and I don't see how anything too disastrous could have been done to his machine without being obvious at the cockpit check. Of course I'm not a genius about aircraft construction and maintenance—I could be wrong there. Try asking my brother Bryan. He's a whiz at all that kind of thing. He'd be able to give you a better opinion than I can. But my belief is that the theory won't hold water. You've no idea how *foolproof* a glider is, Aylwin. Leave it be and it will bring you safe home. All you need do is give it a little help when the speed drops below a certain level, and point the nose the right way. Denver could have done that so long as the wings stayed on."

"The alternative—suicide—isn't likely to make Barbara any happier, especially if she comes to see the reasons for it."

"I'd have thought she'd have to have pretty strong grounds for speculating about murder, though." Lucas was beginning to look worried. "Who exactly does she suspect?"

"I don't know that she really—"

"Not me?" he broke in, seizing Jerome by the elbow. "Good God, not me? Is that why she's been running away from me as if I were something out of 'Quatermass'?"

He swung about and was lunging for the door leading to the main building of the inn when Jerome caught the tail of his jacket.

"Where d'you think you're going?"

"To tell her she's wrong—to explain—"

"Come back, you blithering idiot!" Jerome said, heaving hard on the jacket and catching him by one shoulder. "You can't burst in on her with loud protestations of innocence the moment after she's had to run away to find some peace and quiet."

"Let go of me, will you!" shouted Lucas, struggling wildly.

The potman came round his bar with anxiety on his gnome-like face. "Now please, gentlemen—"

"It's all right. My friend is subject to fits."

Lucas struggled even more fiercely. "You're ruddy well choking me," he croaked. "Take your arm off my throat."

"I'm just about to close," the potman said gingerly.

"Right, I'll finish him off outside," Jerome said obligingly, and began to push Lucas in front of him toward the door. Abruptly Lucas stopped struggling. When they got outside he sat down on the bench in the shelter of the eaves and stared at Jerome.

"God, what a rotten ruddy Saturday this has turned out to be! Wish I'd stayed at home and got on with my work. I had plenty of it."

"Might not be a bad idea to go home and get on with it even now," suggested Jerome. "Honestly, Lucas, you won't do any good barging in on Barbara."

"Maybe I *will* go home," he muttered. "Change my shirt, maybe—this one's all messed up now."

"Sorry about that."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I'd like to change anyhow. We generally have a bit of a hop on Saturday nights and I might as well look respectable."

"It's a good idea."

"What are *you* going to do?" Lucas inquired.

"Go back to the club."

"Oh, I see. So long then."

They stayed where they were—Lucas sitting on the bench looking at Jerome, and Jerome standing looking down at Lucas. Each wanted to see the other off the premises. Jerome knew that the minute his back was turned, Lucas would be inside again, asking the number of Barbara's room.

"Aren't you going then?" Lucas asked.

"I've got no transport."

"Oh. Well, look here," he said, brightening, "why don't you come out to my place with me? I shan't be a jiff, changing, and then I'll drive you back to the club."

Jerome ought to have been suspicious, but it sounded reasonable and he accepted with gratitude.

The fruit farm was a picture as they approached it, the trees in their young leaf and with the green bud clusters promising the blossom to come. The house wasn't so attractive—a bungalow type situated against the road, stripped for action, with ladders, picking baskets, orchard heaters and other paraphernalia ranged along its side.

The equipment was in better trim than the house paint-work. The curtains at the windows, though clean, were meagre and faded. The flower beds by the front door had been left uncultivated and any struggling seedlings had been done to death long ago by the wheels of the Landrover.

"Come and have a look at the trees," Lucas invited. "I've got eight-year-old stock—should be yielding better than it does."

"You took the place over as a going concern?"

"Yes, but it isn't 'going' very well."

At close quarters the fruit trees weren't nearly so pretty. They were treated with creosote and ringed with grease-bands and generally bothered about until it wasn't surprising that the leafage didn't look as happy as it might. "Don't know what's wrong with them," Lucas said morosely. "I've looked it up in the books and I've done everything I ought to have done—tar-oil at Christmas, and all that."

"What did you say you were spraying now? Lime-sulphur?"

"Uh-huh. It's hard work, when you're all on your own."

"Haven't you any help at all, then?"

"Only casual labour at harvest. My housekeeper gives me a hand with the indoor work—packing and dispatching. She's away today, gone to visit her auntie at Bristol. She likes me to go gliding so she can rush off to auntie."

Jerome had stopped to admire a small motorised trolley which stood at the opening to one of the lines of trees. It was a neat little machine with a miniature control panel—"Agitator", "Pressure", "Cut-off".

"What's this, a Flying Saucer?"

"It's my spraying equipment. Not bad, is it? I built it myself."

"By jove, you must have a knack. The tank contains your spray mixture?"

"Yes, and the mixture's kept agitated by the same motor that moves the trolley along the rows of trees. I couldn't afford to buy a commercial sprayer and yet I found I couldn't get around fast enough with a knapsack sprayer, so I dreamed this up. Look, this is where I keep the chemicals."

He led the way to a shed at the side of the orchard. An elegantly lettered notice announced "Poisonous Chemicals. Keep Out." Producing a key, he unlocked the door.

Remembering what Pussy had said about the availability of poisons to a man like Lucas, Jerome looked about with interest. The interior was rather grim, lit by one small window. Drums, canisters and carboys were ranged round the walls: "M.C.P.A.", "2, 4-D", "M.C.P.B." and "2, 4, 5-TB", their labels read.

"Sounds more like an algebra sum than horticulture," Jerome remarked.

Lucas didn't reply. Jerome turned casually, just in time to see the shed door shut him in. He lunged at the door but as he put his hand on the knob heard the key turn.

"What the blazes are you doing, you fool?" he shouted.

There came the sound of Lucas's laughter. "I'm going to see Barbara without any interference from you, lover-boy."

"Come back, Mathewson!"

"I'll come back," promised Lucas. "In good time to carry your lifeless corpse out into the air."

"My lifeless—?" Jerome spluttered. "My God, you're nuts! Come back!"

But, laughing like a maniac, Lucas was running away. The Landrover started up. Coughing and shaking the door furiously, Jerome heard it drive off.

Then, as he was shaken by a tremendous spasm of coughing, fear descended on Jerome. He turned, his back against the shed door.

The interior was filling with a pall of white vapour.

NINE

A TERRIFYING mental picture rose up in front of him. "Poisonous Chemicals. Keep Out". He was locked in this tiny shed, with no-one to hear when he shouted. And he couldn't shout, because he was racked with spasms of coughing.

He tried not to panic. Air. He must have air. The window.

He stumbled across the uneven boards and reached the window. How did it open? Not a sashcord—no, a metal bar—a stayed sash, you lifted it and pushed, and the window opened outwards.

As far as it would go—open it as far as it would go. The cool spring air came in. He leaned there, wet with sweat, gulping in the sweet air. His eyes were running, he could scarcely breathe.

"Oh, God, what way to die," he thought in helpless confusion, and coughed yet again, so hard that the muscles of his stomach ached.

It was perhaps the space of a minute later that a thought struck him. He was still standing up. It was odd. If this were poisonous gas, surely by now his senses should be reeling? Shouldn't he be giving at the knees?

Now wait a bit, he told himself. Who says I'm going to die? Why do I take it for granted this stuff's poison? After all, this is England, not Nazi Germany.

Lucas had said he would come back in time to "carry out his lifeless corpse." But people didn't really do such things—

Unless—unless Lucas had also murdered Richard Denver. Such a man might not hesitate at a second crime, to keep the girl he loved if he thought her attracted to another lover.

But all the same, Jerome didn't feel he was dying. He was coughing like blazes, and his eyes and his nose were running, and his stomach felt as if the Tiller Girls had been practising a precision routine on it.

Yet he wasn't dying. Far from it. He was ceasing to be frightened and was growing very angry.

A stupid practical joke. That's what it was. And where the devil was this vapour coming from, anyhow?

Between spasms of coughing he fished out his handkerchief. Holding it against his mouth and nose, he ducked downwards towards the floor. It was much clearer down here. That was logical, of course. The vapour was carried upwards by the natural rise of warm air, caused by his own presence in the shed. Or was it that? Wasn't there an actual current of vapour? Wasn't it--yes, wasn't it being directed upwards from a jet?

As low on the ground as a basset hound, he made the tour of the floorboards. And found in a corner near the door a small canister with a one-pound weight balanced on a little knob. He could see the steady stream of filmy white vapour, almost like smoke, pouring out from just beneath the weight.

Gingerly he picked up the weight.

The little knob grew a fraction taller. The stream of white mist stopped.

An aerosol. That's all it was. An aerosol, with a weight on the valve to keep it pressed down so that the spray would be continuous.

The canister was about the size of a half-pint paint tin. Still squatting on the floor, he leaned towards it to read its contents.

"Safe. Non-toxic to humans. DEATH to INSECTS. BENZAVAP, the New Simple Insecticide. The pure gamma-isomer of Benzene Hexachloride." A paragraph of small print went on to describe how harmless the contents

were, except to insect pests. A little drawing showed a baby in a diaper directing the spray from the canister at a tree, with the words "Child's Play" coming out of his head in a bubble.

Jerome sat there beside it with the tears running down his cheek, and didn't know whether to laugh or cry to account for them.

Now that the spray had been stopped, the air was growing clearer. He stood up and helped the process by fanning with an old newspaper. Ah, much better. He hadn't coughed for a whole ten seconds. He wiped his face, went to the window, and leaned there to admire the view for a while. The shirt was no longer sticking to his back. He was in possession of his faculties. He was civilized again.

Now the problem was, how to get out? The door was solid. Perhaps he could unscrew the hinges? He poked about and had the luck to find a screwdriver. But the screws wouldn't budge, they were deeply rusted into the plates.

Well, that left the window. He measured it with his eye. About eighteen inches wide and twelve inches high. The problem was that the hinged sash wouldn't stay up out of the way while he got through—oh yes it would though! He picked up a long cane from the floor, put it through the open window, and propped the downward flopping sash up by resting it on the cane as it stood on the ground.

Then he had to wriggle through. There was a drum of chemical conveniently standing under the window. He knelt on that and wormed his way out. As soon as his head and shoulders were out he felt happier, because the rest of him was much skinnier. He was happy a bit too soon, because when he was free out to his waist, his head caught the cane which was propping the sash open. The

sash came down and hit him a terrible crack on the head. He saw stars.

Never mind, he was nearly out. He did the last stage in one huge effort and fell out bodily on the unyielding concrete path.

He'd had a hard day.

Normally he enjoyed a good walk but just at the moment the five miles back to the gliding club didn't appeal to him. He looked about for transport. A pedal bike was propped up against the house wall, but the tyres were flat and he didn't see a bicycle pump. His eyes travelled up the house wall and discovered telephone wires going in.

But how to get in to use the telephone?

Jerome spent a fair amount of time considering whether he had the right to break and enter Lucas Mathewson's house, in view of the treatment he had received at the hands of the owner. He decided he had; but he would rather not, all the same. Still, in the country, people were very trusting. He found the key where the housekeeper had left it, disguised as one of the clothes pegs in the basket hanging outside the back door.

The house was as comfortless inside as out—few rugs or carpets and those few very poor quality. No pictures except manufacturers' advertising calendars. No ornaments except for a small snapshot in a Woolworth's frame, standing on the desk where he found the telephone.

It was the same snapshot of which Barbara had an enlargement. While he waited for Pussy Catt to be brought to the telephone at the gliding club, Jerome studied the picture. Now that he knew the people in it, it conveyed more to him. Denver's face still dominated the group but Pussy's quiet grin showed him as he was—steady, self-confident, intelligent. And Bryan—

He picked up the snap to study Bryan. As Barbara had said, he was so short as to be almost invisible behind

Richard Denver. He seemed to be peering out from behind the other man's elbow. The odd thing was that, now Jerome came to look at him, Bryan seemed to be peering not at the camera, but at Susan Denver.

And unless he was a victim of poor photography, the look on his face was a look of devotion.

There's nothing unusual about a man being caught with a faintly foolish expression on his face in a snapshot. But then something else came into Jerome's mind. Bryan's deft fingers at work on the carving. The Queen for the white set, which had seemed vaguely familiar.

Now Jerome knew why. The Queen in Bryan's chess set was Susan Denver in the robes suitable to Nefertiti, Queen of Egypt.

So Bryan was under the spell of Susan's unwitting fascination. How far under? A man so shy and withdrawn might have very intense feelings smouldering inside.

"Hello--Jerome?" came Pussy's voice. "Where have you got to? You missed your turn for a flight."

"I've been shut up in Lucas Mathewson's garden shed, you'll be amazed to hear."

"You've been where? Oh, another of Lucas's silly practical jokes. What's the matter with your voice, Jerome? You sound as if you've got a sore throat."

"It's not only my throat that's sore. My feelings have been hurt and my self-esteem wounded. However, I'll survive. You wouldn't like to drive out and fetch me, I suppose?"

"No I wouldn't. I'm helping Alan dope his Weihe--"

"Doing what?"

"Painting the wings of Alan's glider."

"Oh, that gluey stuff. Right, then shall I be able to hire a taxi from the village?"

"Don't be silly. Of course I'll come. Just give me ten minutes to get cleaned up and I'll hit the road."

"Thanks a lot, Pussy. Sorry to be a nuisance. By the way, is Bryan Mathewson anywhere around?"

"He's airborne at present. Should have been Lucas, but he was nowhere around so Bryan got his turn. Why?"

"I've been having a long and interesting chat with Lucas. Just thought I'd like to get to know Bryan."

"You won't do that. Nobody knows Bryan very well."

While he waited for Pussy it occurred to Jerome that it would be amusing to mystify Lucas about his escape from the shed. He went back and closed the hinged sash window by laying the stay-bar against the window rim and letting it fall gently into place against the frame. By knocking it with his knuckle from the outside he succeeded in making the bar drop down just that fraction which made it fit over the knob inside, so that it looked as if it had never been opened. Intrigued at the ease with which he did this, he decided to see if it could be opened as easily. He stooped and slipped the blade of his penknife between the window and the frame from below. The blade point touched the stay bar. He pushed the bar upward so that it came off the knob that kept it closed. Inevitably, the window opened a fraction. He slid his fingers in and opened the window quite easily, propping it open with the stay-bar.

"Fat lot of good having a lock and key for the poison shed door when anybody—but anybody—could get in the side window," he said as he closed it again. He looked around for means to climb in once the window was open. Heavens, there were ladders, and baskets to be piled up. And inside, as he remembered, a handy chemical drum to step down on to.

It would be no use building up a case against Lucas on the grounds that he had access to poisons. Anybody could get in here and help himself.

He was sitting on the front doorstep of the house when Pussy drove up, still in his work overalls. "Come on,

peasant, look lively. There's a lot of gliders to stow tonight and time's getting on."

"I hear we have a hop at the club?"

"So we do, and if Jane's done her stuff we'll have a bit of a barbecue. It's rather pleasant in an unsophisticated way. Susan always says it's rather uncivilized," he added, laughing ruefully. "Roasting little chunks of meat over a fire—I suppose she's right."

"Lucas thinks she's a 'good scout'."

"Isn't that typical? Fancy calling Susan a 'scout'!"

Jerome said pensively, "Aren't you confusing smallness of vocabulary with smallness of intelligence? I think you underrated Lucas. He's got his wits about him."

Yes indeed. The argument in favour of the suicide theory had been cogently stated. And Lucas had tricked Jerome very neatly, both in getting him unsuspectingly into the orchard shed and then in making him believe the benzene hexachloride spray would kill him. Perhaps he was more of an opportunist than a planner. But there was no evidence that Richie Denver's death need have been planned very long in advance.

"That fruit-spraying machine of his," he went on, "seems a nifty piece of work."

"Oh, did he show you that? I wouldn't know, not being in the horticultural line myself, but some of the chaps who live locally say he'll make money with it. He's patented it, I believe. If he can get some money to develop it, he might do well."

"Now that Denver's dead, he might come into some money?"

"From the Pteron? Yes, certainly—if the lads can salvage the production company. Alan's the chief mover, and he's not a bad businessman—at least he's made a good living out of tea importing. I think he'll get the Pteron into production and we'll all get a fair return for our

investment. I daresay Lucas looks forward to getting it so as to re-invest it in his spray machine. He even might make enough to be able to present himself as a reasonable suitor for his lady-love. Old man Haskell's not a bad old stick. He might look favourably on an up-and-coming young chap like Lucas. Yes, Lucas might do pretty well for himself one way and another, now Denver's dead."

Jerome had the feeling once more that Pussy was very quick to see advantages to Lucas from Denver's death. He was anxious to believe Lucas guilty—or at least to put him forward as the most likely suspect. But before Jerome could frame a question that would fish successfully in these troubled waters, their attention was distracted to the sky overhead.

A slender shape swooped against the pale blue sky. It wasn't very high; the silver body and blue trim identified it as the syndicate glider in which the Mathewsons had a share. Bryan was flying it now, Jerome recalled.

"Is he coming down?" he asked with some anxiety. "He seems very low."

"Yes, he must have thought he'd find 'lift' but he's been unlucky."

"He's all right, though, is he?"

"Of course he is. He's misjudged his distance, that's all. He's not going to make it to the airfield."

"Not?" he echoed, still anxious. "Then what will happen?"

"Relax, relax. He'll land in a field, that's all. Probably one of poor old Farmer Clifford's. Wait a sec, which way's the wind? Yes—well, in that case he'll have to turn and land towards us. We'll pull up, shall we, and see where he touches down. Then we can take word back to the club to bring out the trailer."

"Oh, this is where the trailer comes in, is it."

"Yes, he'll have to de-rig—you remember, the way my

Ollie was in its trailer. Normally he'd have to walk or cadge a lift either to the nearest phone or to the club, to get the trailer on the move. Here he comes. Which landing ground has he chosen?"

The car had stopped. They both got out on to the roadway to watch the glider. It was coming gracefully towards them at a fairly steep angle but wasn't yet turned into the wind for the landing. Pussy took off his scarf and waved vigorously. The pilot of the aircraft, clearly visible as a man though not distinguishable as which man, was too busy to spare a hand to wave. But he wagged the wings of his aircraft in acknowledgement. Then he continued gently on his way and with effortless ease the glider turned. He was little more than a hundred feet up, and his airbrakes were open, but now he was many yards away and Jerome could not see the pilot any more. The nose of the glider was pointed into the far corner of a field about a quarter of a mile off, showing the blue-green gleam of winter-sown barley.

Smoothly the machine descended, and came to rest without the slightest bump or jar with plenty of clearance from the hedge.

"Is that how Denver should have landed?" Jerome asked with curiosity.

"He could have done better than that. He'd have managed things so that he was nearer the road and didn't have to tramp round a field of growing crops to fetch the trailer."

"How actually did Denver land?"

"Clifford saw him come down. He gave evidence at the inquest. Said he saw the glider stall and half-spin, then right itself and come down in a steep dive. It hit a stone barn in a field of kale. Damn queer. Why choose kale? A lousy crop to land in—you do a lot of damage to it, not like barley or wheat which picks up easily again at this time of year if you bend it a bit."

"Ought we to go and give Bryan a hand?"

"No, the fewer peasants tramping over the crops, the better. We'll just let him know we'll send the trailer." Pussy jumped on to the bonnet of his car, stood erect, and waved his scarf over his head. A tiny figure in the glider stood up and waved likewise.

"Oke. He knows we'll take the message. Come on."

At the clubhouse no-one was available to drive the trailer. Most members were out at the far side of the field watching or helping the launch of the trainer. Jane was in the kitchen preparing tea, and looked very cross indeed when asked to come out.

"Come on, cheer up, Jane. Jerome'll do the actual work--all you need do is order him about. Isn't that right, Jerome?"

They coupled the big trailer on the back of Pussy's Ford and set off, Jane still looking mutinous. When they reached the nearest point on the road to the point where Bryan had grounded they saw that he had company.

"It's Cliford. Poor chap, he's got a lot to put up with, the way us peasants keep belly-slopping on top of his crops.

"What do you do - pay him damages?" Jerome asked as he plodded round the outskirts of the field.

"Yes, but he's very reasonable. He knows we never do any wanton damage."

As they approached the silver and blue Olympia they could hear the farmer chuckling rather grimly. "I was glad indeed to hear it," he was saying, "when somebody answered the club telephone and said they'd heard about your forced landing and you were quite all right." He included the newcomers in his address. "I saw him coming down. Gave me a bit of a shock, you know, after last time. . . ."

"Nice landing," Jerome said to Bryan, halfway between question and approval.

"Not bad."

"Pity you had to come down," Pussy said.

"I was an idiot to leave the ridge. The afternoon had turned so nice and warm, though, I thought I might find a useful thermal."

"Not really warm enough yet."

"No. Roll on June, July and August."

As they made this exchange the two men were already at work on the aircraft. Little protective strips were taken off and laid in the cockpit. Now Bryan proceeded to disconnect various many-stranded, tough-looking wires, the first being at the fin.

"What does that do?" Jerome inquired.

"That's the elevator. Makes the nose rise and fall."

"And these?" "These" were connections at the centre of the aircraft leading out to the wings.

"Ailerons and airbrakes. Ailerons make the glider roll from side to side as you move the control column. Airbrakes or spoilers—those sort of flaps folded into the wing surfaces—they steepen the gliding angle so that, for instance, you can come in to land in a small field."

"Did you use them as you landed?"

"No, wasn't necessary. I'm chary about using them on all and every occasion, myself. It's a bad habit. You might find yourself doing it when you were flying at speed, and the strain on the wing roots is terrific, enough to wrench the safety pins askew."

"I suppose that could account for Denvers crash then? Something wrenches askew because of strain when the what's-its were applied suddenly?"

"Wrenched askew," muttered Pussy as he struggled with his task. "In that heap of matchwood that was left, everything was wrenches askew. I don't blame Alan for being at a loss."

"He was not at a loss!" Jane cried in annoyance. "Alan

knows the difference between strain caused by flying handling and damage caused by a crash."

So as not to annoy her futher, the men got on with their work in silence. Jerome's eyes were on the steel cables which went from the cockpit to the ailerons, the rudder, the airbrakes. They were very strong yet they were totally exposed at several points. Any ill-intentioned person with a pair of wire cutters or a file. . . .

He had that unmistakable feeling of being watched, and turned to find the farmer's shrewed eyes on him. The look on the old man's face said clearly, "You're looking for a reason for Denver's crash but you're looking at the wrong thing, my lad." He jerked his head at Jerome. Jerome went to join him a few paces away from the glider.

"You're not a flier," he commented.

"No."

"A friend of the late Mr. Denver?"

"What makes you ask?"

"Because I fancy you're disturbed about the way he died. And so am I. I've got a bit of information that you might find a use for."

"Information?"

"I saw the crash, you know."

"Something you didn't tell the police?"

"I told 'em what I saw. It was only afterwards I wondered if I'd told it the right way."

"What was this information, then?"

"S-sh," said Clifford, nodding towards Jane Osbertson. "Not now. She'll jump down my throat if I say a word against her husband."

TEN

WHEN they got back to the club grounds Jerome discovered to his dismay that he was expected to rig the glider again, having just helped de-rig it half an hour before.

"Wouldn't it do in the morning?" he protested.

"That means time wasted if flying conditions are good. Come on, it won't take long."

"I hope I get my reward in heaven," he said resentfully.

"You can have your reward as soon as we've finished. You were due for a flight, weren't you? Only you weren't here when your turn came round. Right—most of the pupils who were listed for the trainer are having tea now. We'll snitch a flight for you while they're busy. How's that?"

They all went to the Flying Instructors' Office to consult the list. The F.I.O. was a crowded cubicle tacked on to the end of the men's sleeping hut, and it was crowded with maps, charts, a ledger marked "Flying Charges," another labelled "Fines," a tattered graph with pins stuck in it, and a book with a red board cover.

This book had flimsy pages perforated on the left side like a receipt book, and the next page to be filled in lay open to view. It was headed "Daily Inspection Certificates: Mollin Ridge Gliding Club," and in heavy italics underneath ran the warning, "Before signing out the machine the following items *must* be checked."

The "items" constituted a heavy list. Four columns of them, with a space for a check mark alongside. About eight separate clauses to each column, which made a total of about thirty-two working parts to pass as air-worthy. He ran his eye over them: "Wing unit: pins,

roots and strut. Safety pins locked. Aileron hinges. Dive brakes or spoilers. Fuselage; quick releases. Tail unit; rudder, elevator, and trimmer hinges. Control circuit; free operation, no wear, no backlash. Wire free from rust."

As Barbara had said, "We're not quite so casual as all that." Jerome flipped the pages back until he came to those for the 3rd March. One bore a bold signature: "R. Denver." A quick glance showed that for the Polaris taken out that day a check mark was entered by every item, and a note in handwriting below the print—"Test flying. Parts renewed." and then a scribbled list of bolts replaced, levers re-aligned.

So if anything had been done to the Polaris, it had to be after that thorough check by the pilot. *After* the Daily Inspection check, and before the pre-take-off cockpit check, and something so subtle it wouldn't be noticed by an experienced pilot like Denver.

A tall order. Yet Jerome had only to glance out of the door of the F.I.O. to see gliders parked casually along the field perimeter, easy of access to anyone who wanted to meddle.

There was no difficulty in receiving permission to take Jerome's flight in the trainer. They began to make their way round the field to the spot where it stood, docile as a domesticated dragonfly.

"Where are you off to?" demanded a voice behind them.

Jerome wheeled. "Ah!" he cried. "Come here and have your block knocked off."

Lucas grinned and backed away. "You gave me an awful fright," he complained. "I got back to the shed in due course and called your name through the door, and there was no reply! I really thought you must have passed out."

"Serves you right. Of all the bloody silly tricks—! Suppose I'd been an asthmatic or a heart case?"

"Not you. Look as healthy as a greyhound, and damned near as skinny. How did you get out, by the way?"

It was Jerome's turn to grin. "Aha," he said.

"We're setting up a flight for Jerome," Pussy put in. "We're a bit short on the launching team. Come and give us a hand, Lucas."

"Why should I?"

"You are a lazy clot."

"Tell you what—you be the launching team, I'll be the pilot."

"Oh, no, no thanks very much," Jerome said hastily. "Pussy is going to take me up."

"Oh, just as you like. I thought Pussy would rather stay on the ground so as to be here when Susan turns up."

"Susan?" Pussy said, stopping and swinging about. "What makes you think Susan will be here?"

"I was at The Silent Woman about an hour ago when she rang up to reserve a room."

"But she said she wouldn't be—"

"I spoke to her myself. I had just come in and asked to speak to Barbara, but her old man had turned up so she wasn't available. Then the reception female answered the phone and said 'Yes, Mrs. Denver' and 'No, Mrs. Denver,' so I asked if I could have a word. She said she was coming down for the week-end because she felt lonely."

Jerome glanced at Pussy out of the corner of his eye and saw with some envy that he was looking pleased and blushing.

"So would you rather I took Jerome up for his trip round the bay? After all, I'm due a flight in *something*, aren't I? I missed my turn in the syndicate glider today."

"Righto," Pussy agreed. "How about a cable?"

"Here it comes."

A tractor was chuffing across the field from the winch, drawing in its wake two lengths of thick wire from the drums inside the winch cage. It reached the glider at the same time as the launching team. Bryan ran forward and helped to detach the cables from the bar at the back of the tractor. Then he laid them down in the grass with care. The tractor driver—it was Piglet—gave Jerome an encouraging wave and a cry of "Ride 'em, cowboy!" before turning and heading back to the winch.

"Who's going to be bat man?" Pussy asked.

Bryan said, "I don't mind," and walked off some twenty yards. The others came to the side of the glider, a big blue two-seater.

"It's a beautiful blue but it hasn't a hood," quoted Pussy with a grin at Jerome.

"Oh God bless the glider and make it good!" Jerome returned fervently. He would really rather not get airborne with Lucas Mathewson, but he saw no way out of it except rank cowardice.

Bryan had stopped and picked up a thing like an outside lollipop—the signalling bat. He was staring towards the winch which would pull in the cable for the launch, a practically indiscernible little blue box about half a mile off.

"Hop in," said Lucas. "Take the right hand seat, please. It's where you'll sit if you do decide to take lessons in flying this delightful machine." He walked round the nose of the glider and climbed in the other side. "Do up the harness, eh? First the left shoulder strap, then right lower strap and then—Oh, you've done it. Right. Keep quiet a sec, will you? I'm just going to do the cockpit check."

He leaned out. "Hold the wing, eh, Pussy?"

Pussy stooped, removed the old tyre from the wing, and

listed it so that the aircraft stood level. Lucas nodded and moved the control stick from side to side, glancing out to see that the ailerons answered; moved the stick back and forth to check that the elevators moved; pushed the rudder pedals and assured himself that they responded. He pulled a lever at his left leg. "Spoilers open?"

"Spoilers open," Pussy called from the wing tip thirty feet away.

"Closed?"

"Closed."

"Right, let's check the cable release."

Pussy lowered the wing and disappeared out of sight. By leaning as far out of the unprotected cockpit as he could, Jerome was just able to see Pussy's legs as he lay under the nose of the glider.

"Open."

In response to the call, Lucas pulled a yellow knob on the left of the instrument panel. "Open," he echoed.

"Closed?"

"Closed." Lucas let go the knob.

There was a faint sound from under the glider's belly and a very slight suggestion of movement. "That's Pussy testing to see if the cable release works," Lucas explained. "You see the launching cable is attached to a ring underneath which can be opened to let the cable ring in. Then when our ring is closed the cable should stay firmly attached to the glider until the winch has hest us up to a good height. Then we pull this knob, the release works, and the cable drops to the ground."

"It's like a kite on a string, as Pussy said. Only when you're as high as the 'string' will allow, you free yourself and fly off."

"That's it exactly, only—"

"Hi, I'm pulling on this cable!" called Pussy protestingly.

"Oh, sorry." Lucas pulled the release knob. "Okay?"

"Okay cable release. Ready to be hooked on?"

"Yes, ready. Open?"

"Open."

"Closed?"

"Closed." Once more there was the faint tugging from below.

"Now we're hooked on ready to go. Are you all set for the launch, Jerome?"

"I'm ready if you are"

"Not nervous?"

"Should I be?"

"Well, you know, poor Richie Denver came to an untimely end in one of these," Lucas said mockingly. He glanced out at the wing-tip, which Pussy was once more holding. "Clear above and behind, Puss?"

Pussy glanced overhead—presumably for aircraft—and to the rear. "All clear."

"That's to make sure no bloody fool is near enough to get swept over when the cable starts to pull us forward. We like lots of space around us"

"But Pussy's holding 'e wing!"

"That's just to keep us level until momentum does the job for us." To Pussy he shouted, "Take up slack."

"Take up slack," Pussy repeated in the same tone, his head turned to Bryan.

At once Bryan began to wave his signalling bat to and fro, the flat circle at knee level like a huge coloured pendulum.

There was a faint rustling sound in the grass and then a small tremor as the tightened cable exerted slight pull on the glider.

"All out!" Lucas said crisply.

"All out!" shouted Pussy to Bryan.

Bryan began to wave his signalling bat again, but this

time over his head. At once the sound of the winch, distant but clear, could be heard, and the two-seater began to slip forward.

Almost at once they were moving so fast that Pussy, still at the wing-tip, could hardly keep up. Within seconds the glider's nose came up and, unbelievably, they were off the ground. Pussy fell back, behind them—and below them. They were airborne, and climbing steeply.

Jerome glanced down. He could see Mr. Clifford's fields unrolling under the wing of the glider, with the main road cutting his land in two like a knife blade. Ahead was Mollin Ridge, where the wind surged up and made a crest of rising air in which a sailplane could soar.

Still they were climbing. They were almost directly over the winch now. "Better cast off before it's done for us," remarked Lucas ironically, and pulled the yellow release knob.

Jerome glanced over the side. It was just possible to see the black tendril of cable falling away to the ground.

"Well, here we are. How do you like it?"

The air seemed to be whispering past them with a steady rushing sound, not alarming and not insistent, but clear and rather pleasant, like someone whistling absently through his teeth. The breeze on the face was quite keen. Now Jerome understood why some of the fliers wore knitted caps.

"Can we go out over the ridge?"

"If you like. We mustn't stop for any fancy work though—the pupils want the trainer back." He nodded towards the instrument board. "I'm going to turn out to the ridge. Watch the variometer—that rectangular dial with the numbers in a vertical arrangement. When we hit the lift over the ridge you'll see a little green bubble go up."

He turned to the left in a smooth arc and in something under a minute there was a flicker of green in the tube of

the variometer. A tiny ball appeared and began to mount.

"That's it," Lucas said, a pleased and welcoming grin spreading over his craggy features. "Green air."

"But that's the name of Susan's restaurant."

"It is an' all." Lucas seemed to go into a momentary brown study, from which he emerged to say, "When did you say you'd met Susan?"

"On 'Thursday."

"And Barbara at the same time?"

Jerome prevented himself from nodding assent. "Oh no—I only met her this morning. Pussy introduced us outside the cabin."

"But when you were giving me the benefit of your good advice, earlier on this afternoon, you said Barbara wouldn't throw herself at a man she only met three days ago."

"I don't think I said that," Jerome said, feeling a great desire to kick himself.

"But you did. Believe me, chum, I was taking sharp notice of all you said. You said you'd met her three days ago."

"I think I said she wouldn't throw herself at a man she'd only known a couple of days," Jerome protested.

"That isn't what you said. But even so, it means you knew her before you got here—"

"No, no. 'Couple of days'—it's just a casual phrase meaning 'a short time'."

Lucas shrugged and turned his attention to the instrument panel. The green ball was still rising. He nodded to their left.

"See that stone building down there?"

"Yes?"

"That's the barn Denver crashed into. From his launch he seems to have headed straight into it. Like this."

He eased the stick back. The glider seemed to falter. The wind along the fabric altered its note. While Jerome

was still trying to work out what had happened, Lucas pulled back on the stick and pushed hard at one of the rudder pedals. In response the nose of the glider went down alarmingly and they began to spiral downwards.

"Look over the side," Lucas suggested.

It was a mistake to obey. The countryside was rotating gently down there, like a chessboard on a gramophone turntable.

Even while he was still looking the chessboard ceased its rotation. But it was still coming towards them. Jerome turned anxiously to Lucas.

"We're diving!"

"Yes, when a glider goes into a spin it rights itself easily enough -- I told you these machines would practically fly themselves. But they need a bit of help to come out of a dive. Denver didn't bother to give the Polaris that little bit of help."

They were rushing towards the barn. Jerome looked at Lucas's hands, clasped loosely round the joystick. When was he going to pull out?

And then Lucas turned his head. And grinned at him wickedly.

Jerome closed his lips on the urgent plea he was about to utter. Very well, if they were going to crash as Denver had crashed just to satisfy Lucas's desire for revenge on a man he considered his rival, so be it. He would rather make a dent in the ground than give Lucas the satisfaction of seeing him frightened.

Then it dawned on him that he had a duplicate set of controls in front of him, as pupil in a trainer. He clasped his hands round the stick. He eased it back. The glider's nose came up. They were not going to crash after all.

Lucas said grimly, "Scared, eh?" And finished the recovery of the aircraft.

Neither said anything more until they had landed

again. As they sat side by side watching Pussy and Bryan run up to help push the trainer back to the launching place, Jerome felt a tremendous desire to hit Lucas very, very hard indeed. But there were a great many aspects to consider: this man might indeed be a murderer, showed some of the irresponsibility of the maladjusted killer.

"What was all that in aid of?" he asked.

"All 'what'? It was just a demonstration of how a glider will right itself no matter what."

"Not out of a dive, it won't. Why did you wait so long before doing anything?"

"I didn't wait very long. We weren't in any danger. You'll need to develop stronger nerves than that if you're going to be a glider pilot."

"Listen to me, Mathewson," he said, forcing himself to speak calmly. "That's the second dirty trick you've played me since we met—"

"And speaking of dirty tricks, *when* did you meet Barbara?"

"Look here, if it's only because of Barbara—"

"Only?" Lucas laughed, an odd, strangled sound. "What a funny word to use. You know, Aylwin, you ought to be careful. First you get in a panic about being locked in a garden shed, then you get in a panic about flying in a glider. You really ought to go home before you frighten yourself to death."

ELEVEN

HE helped push the glider back to its place beside the second launching cable. Then he shoved his hands in his pockets and walked away.

"Hi, where are you off to?" called Pussy.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked shortly.

"Oh—here, what's up with you? I was only going to say, don't walk across the field, walk round. There's a cable out."

"Very well." He began to make his way round by the hawthorn hedge. Bryan and Pussy followed, with Lucas in the rear. No-one spoke. A blight seemed to have fallen on the party, at least so it seemed to Jerome; until, turning to apologize to Pussy for his rudeness, he discovered that all of the men were watching the lane that led to the club buildings.

Pussy, of course, would be on the watch for Susan's arrival. Bryan too, he guessed. Why Lucas was interested he didn't know.

When they reached the concrete surround by the hangars Pussy and Lucas were claimed to help put away one of the gliders. Jerome and Bryan walked on.

"Going in to tea?"

"No, I thought I'd go for a stroll first." He was thinking of Mr. Clifford's invitation to go and see him. Better go now, for after dark he wouldn't be able to find his way over unfamiliar ground.

"I'll come with you," Bryan said, shooting a little glance at him out of the corner of his eye.

Jerome was about to put him off; then it dawned on him that perhaps Bryan wanted to go up to the main road junction to meet Susan. They walked on together. He

wanted to get to know this little man but it was difficult to think of a topic of conversation. Then he remembered the chess piece. He asked if Bryan had finished it yet.

To his surprise Bryan looked suddenly rather grim and extremely vexed. "It's gone amissing—since lunch."

"Missing? You mean you've lost it?"

"I mean someone's taken it."

"But—why should anyone—?"

"I don't know, Aylwin. By heaven, if it's one of Lucas's silly jokes I'll have the skin off him. He says he hasn't got it, though."

"Where was it?"

"In my jacket pocket. I left my jacket on the back of a chair in the lounge. When it was my turn for a launch I went back for it, felt in my pockets to make sure I'd got my handkerchief and my fruit drops—and the chess piece was missing."

"It must have fallen out."

"I don't think so. The pockets on this jacket are pretty safe." He touched the flapped tweed pockets. It would really be difficult to imagine anything falling out.

Jerome assured him the carving would turn up, and Bryan nodded politely. But there was something tense and angry behind his politeness. If he could feel so strongly about the loss of a carved representation of Susan Denver, what might be his feelings towards the real woman?

They were passing the Flying Instructors' Office at the end of the men's dormitory hut when Alan Osbertson put his head out.

"Hi! Aylwin! There's a packet for you."

"For me? A packet of what?"

"Dunno. I found it on my desk here when I came back from lunch. Here you are."

He came out of the office, a stocky figure made faintly ridiculous by his baggy blue-grey flying suit from the pocket of which the bobble of a gaudy red and blue knitted cap peeped forth. He handed Jerome a small package and went back to his paperwork.

It was wrapped in half a sheet of duplicating paper. The name "J. Aylwin" was printed on it in pencil, in block letters. The paper was held in place by a rubber band, which Jerome now slipped off. The paper opened to disclose that it was the half of one of the typed notices from the club notice board. Inside was a cigarette packet pushed out of shape by whatever it now contained, which was certainly not cigarettes: something hard, partially rounded, and light in weight. Jerome drew out the tray of the packet.

Exposed to view was Bryan's missing carving, the white queen. Under it on the pasteboard drawer lay a snapshot, another print of the one Jerome had seen a couple of hours ago on Lucas Mathewson's desk.

"My chess piece!" exclaimed Bryan, reaching for it. Then his glance fell on the picture. He withdrew his hand, his eyes going dark and cold.

"Don't you want it?" Jerome said after a moment, offering him the box once more.

This time Bryan picked up the carving. "But why was it addressed to you?" he said in bewilderment.

"Somebody's idea of a joke, I suppose."

"I thought maybe—Lucas—had taken the carving. He likes to do things-- to make me wild." His hesitant manner was now almost a stammer. "But why should—should he send it to *you*?"

Jerome shrugged. "He's been carrying on something of a campaign against me," he said, trying to sound amused. "He's a trifle off his rocker, your brother."

"He is a bit of a wild man of the wood," Bryan said

tolerantly. "He gets me so angry. . . . But there's no real harm in him."

Oh no? Jerome wasn't by any means so sure. Lucas was a frightening character, violent and at the mercy of his own moods.

"But the snapshot?" Bryan went on. "Why put the chess piece in with the snapshot?"

Jerome took it out and let his eyes travel from the face there to the white queen. "That is a likeness of Susan, isn't it?"

"The snap? Yes, Lucas took it last October. We've all got copies of it."

"I meant the carving. You've carved the queen in the likeness of Susan Denver."

As he said it, understanding hit Jerome. Someone—perhaps Lucas, who seemed to be going out of his way to plague and perplex him—had sent him a message: "Bryan Mathewson has chosen to carve a likeness of Susan—why?—because he's secretly attracted to her."

He turned the packet over in his hands. "Who smokes this brand?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." Bryan took the packet and showed a little tear on the flap. "This is the packet I finished at lunch time. I threw it in the waste paper basket in the lounge."

"And the paper is from the noticeboard in the lounge. And your coat was on the back of the chair in the lounge. So it was all extremely easy. Anyone could have collected the materials for this parcel."

"But why?" persisted Bryan, troubled.

"Oh, folk get up to some silly pranks sometimes," Jerome said easily. If the poor fellow still couldn't see that this secret had been discovered, why enlighten him?

As if perturbed by some faint suspicion that this message

had been read and understood by the man at his side although not by himself, Bryan cleared his throat and began to put up defences. "I suppose you're wondering why I chose to use Susan as a model for my white Queen?"

"Not in the least. She's such an extremely beautiful girl, it must be a pleasure to carve her features."

"Isn't she?" Bryan said with quick enthusiasm, "And so good—so concerned for others as well as herself. You know about Barbara Haskell and that business with Susan's husband?"

Jerome nodded.

"When I was in France with them last year—oh, I can't tell you how I admired Susan." He was so fraught with emotion at the memory that he stammered violently on "admired."

So that was it. Perhaps always attracted to her—who could fail to be? And then, in France, watching Susan's patient kindness to this young, misguided "other woman"—and toppling over into love for her. Now the outburst against Denver was understandable, the threat to "close his mouth for him, perhaps, forever." From there, perhaps only a step to carrying it out—and how easy it could be for a man so deft with his hands, described by his own brother as "a whiz at all that kind of thing."

His own brother? Could it really have been Lucas, after all, who sent this tell-tale packet to Jerome? It was like pointing to his brother as a murder suspect.

And come to think of it, why should someone inform him, Jerome Aylwin, of murder suspects? It looked as if one of the gliding club members had guessed he was here, not to take up gliding, but to inquire into Richard Denver's death. But who had guessed? Who had sent the package? And why should the sender want to help, want to point a finger at Bryan Mathewson?

Unless it was someone who felt endangered and wanted to direct suspicion elsewhere?

He woke up to the fact that Bryan was still speaking. ". . . Susan trying to save Barbara from her own mistakes. Denver was beyond the reach of her influence—he always did just what he wanted, regardless of others. The best Susan could do was be patient, and not agree to a divorce so that Barbara couldn't commit the ultimate mistake of marrying Denver."

"That makes Susan something of a saint, doesn't it?"

"It does, indeed, and of course people always get embarrassed at the word. But in fact Susan is good, all the way through, and prepared to go through fire for what she believes to be right. No matter how she herself might suffer, Susan would do what she thought to be right."

"And so she stayed married to Denver, partly to protect Barbara Haskell?" Jerome said, hoping he didn't sound as incredulous as he felt. Poor fellow, he really had it badly if he believed any woman capable—Yet why be so patronising about Bryan's opinions? Bryan had known Susan a great deal longer than he had. Perhaps he was right. Susan, with her quite extraordinary beauty and her tranquil, luminous eyes—he had likened her to an Egyptian queen, was it any more fanciful to think of her as a saint?

One thing was certain. To free a woman like that from an unfaithful, unkind husband would seem to Bryan a worthwhile, almost a pleasant task.

". . . But I don't speak about my opinions to anybody," Bryan was saying. "They'd think I was cracked. I don't know why I'm talking to you like this. I don't generally let on about what I'm thinking—Lucas has laughed at me so much that I'm chary of saying anything to anybody."

"You don't get on with him?" Jerome hinted, anxious

to know if there was enough animosity between the brothers to make Lucas turn informer.

"Oh, there's no harm in Lucas. He's just like an over-grown schoolboy, that's all. He wouldn't admit it, but he's fond of me in his own funny way. I wish he'd stayed with me in the works. He's good with his hands, you know. But there wasn't enough money in cabinet-making for him."

"I suppose the demand is pretty limited—for hand-made furniture, I mean. Although if all your work is on the same level as your chessmen, they ought to beating a path to your door."

Bryan coloured and gave him his brief, shy smile. "It's good of you to say so. I try to keep up certain standards. My feeling is, if you're right with your own conscience, nothing else matters-- not money, or other folk's judgements, or anything. But Lucas wanted the money, you see. First he tried selling agricultural equipment but the commission wasn't high enough, and then he was with a big aircraft company but he didn't like taking orders from the foreman. He wanted to be his own boss. So then he asked for his share of the capital, and invested some in Denver's Pteron and used the rest to buy his fruit farm."

"I was there this afternoon. The trees don't look very happy. Is something attacking them?"

"Shouldn't think so. He's done the work according to the book—tar-oil wash in December, lime-sulphur starting in March. He's not a fool, you know—he's inexperienced, but he's read it all up in the government handbooks. But what he really needs is paid staff to help him get through the work. He won't admit it, but the strain's telling on him. I've just been thinking today, he looks tired. That's why his investment in the Pteron is so important. With a bit of money behind him he could do so much better."

"I can imagine how frustrating it must have—"

"Frustrating! You've chosen just the right word! All we could do was stand by and watch that fool Denver make a hash of it. First he took a lease on premises that were quite unsuitable and when he tried to get out of the lease, found he couldn't. And so on—absolute incompetence."

"So that, now he's dead, prospects are better for a good many people?"

"Oh yes," Bryan muttered, in a low grim tone in which there was no trace of hesitation, "he's better dead."

They had reached the main road and were standing negligently by the hedge. Jerome made general inquiries about the footpaths, not specifically asking the way to Mr. Clifford's farm. They were still standing there in talk when a bright new Renault saloon car came round the curve of the road.

"It's Susan!" Bryan said.

The car drew up beside them.

"You've come to meet me," Susan said, looking deeply pleased. "How sweet of you, Bryan. And you too, Jerome." She gave him a special smile of reward and taking one hand off the wheel, laid it on his wrist. He had to resist an extraordinary temptation to close his other hand over it.

And when he moved away so as to be out of the temptation, he saw Bryan looking at him with a puzzled frown.

"Hop in," Susan invited. "I'm dying for a cup of tea. I hope I'm in time?"

Rapidly Jerome abandoned the idea of going to visit Farmer Clifford. Susan opened the front door of the car. Both men moved and stooped, to get in. Then they stopped and looked at each other.

"Do hurry up," she urged. "You know Jane only keeps tea available until six." She reached out a hand and

tugged at the elbow of Jerome's jacket. "Come on, Jerome."

So Jerome, highly delighted, sat in front with her. And Bryan got in the back, and said not a word on the journey back to the clubhouse.

TWELVE

THE meal being served at Mollin Ridge Gliding Club was that solid British collation, high tea. Jane very reasonably considered this as her last catering chore of the day; if anyone wanted to eat thereafter he was supposed to prepare it for himself with the least mess in the kitchen and the smallest amount of washing-up he could contrive. From this had arisen the custom of the barbecue supper, which would be cooked in the open by the members as and when they wanted it later.

But at present the members were eating—or had eaten—at the long table in the dining room. Jane was dispensing tea. She jumped up in delight as the two men came in with Susan.

“Susan! My dear! Why didn’t you let me know you were coming?”

“I didn’t know myself until mid-afternoon.” They exchanged those scantling kisses which Englishwomen use to show affection. “I suppose you couldn’t spare me a cup of tea?”

“My pet, of course. But there isn’t much left to eat—”

“That’s all right, Janie. I’ll be dining at The Silent Woman later on.”

“Oh?” Jane said in disappointment. “Aren’t you staying at the club, then?”

“I thought I’d rather be more on my own, Jane.”

“Of course. I quite understand. We’re all delighted to see you anyhow. You’ll spend the evening with us, now won’t you?”

Susan nodded and accepted her cup. Jerome, who had had to take a place some distance down the long table, was intrigued to see how practically all the men were

leaning forward to look at her. The two German pilots, with not the slightest idea who she was, were as fascinated as the others. Even the girls—four of them, unknown to Jerome and always destined to remain so—had their eyes fixed on Susan, probably in admiration of the dress she was wearing. Part of her magic lay in the dress: by the mere fact of wearing one she achieved femininity among this be-trousered and be-sweatered gang. And its glowing tint of violet echoed the colour of the fleck in her grey eyes. Jerome marvelled at the difference between Susan's "mourning-wear" and Barbara's. No-one could have called Susan's dress gay—yet it was attractive, a pleasure to the eye in every way.

As if to accentuate her femininity, her domesticity, she insisted on helping to clear the dining room after the meal

"But Susan, I really can't allow—Suppose you got a spot on that lovely new dress!"

"Lend me a tea towel for an apron then."

"But what a pity to hide it. It's absolutely gorgeous, Susan. I bet it's a model."

"Nothing of the sort. I got it last time in Paris. in a little off-the-peg shop near the Place Pigalle."

"You mean last October? I bet you've never worn it, then. It looks brand new. And it looks frightfully haute couture!"

"Since when have I been able to afford haute couture? Come on Jane, let's get cleared up. Here, Jerome, you carry the tray." Obediently he trekked at her side, accepting piles of plates and teacups. Bryan tagged along behind her, trying to be useful. Pussy, having heard from one of the departing tea-drinkers that she'd arrived, came hurrying in.

"I was watching for your car, darling. I didn't see it come in."

She greeted him pleasantly, after which they all got

roped in to do the washing up. Jerome hated washing up, but when she smiled at him like that he was positively happy to cope with jam-adhered plates. They sat around afterwards, chatting sociably. Jerome felt Susan's eyes resting on him as often as on Pussy and with as much warmth, which seemed unhopet-for good luck, to say the least of it. But then he noticed Bryan's reactions—the poor chap didn't know which of the other two men to be jealous of.

So he was to be admitted into her inner circle of friendship, he, Jerome Aylwin? And not poor Bryan Mathewson? He tried very hard to feel sorry for Bryan.

Presently Susan said she must get back to the inn if she were to have time to change for dinner. They all trooped out to see her off. Pussy looked surprised when she opened the door of the Renault.

"No wonder I didn't see you drive in. I was looking for the old station wagon."

She coloured slightly. "I hope you don't think it was wrong of me to be in such a hurry to get rid of it, but it held so many unhappy memories. And I don't need a car with a fitment for towing the trailer any more."

"You were quite right!" Bryan broke in vehemently. "Besides, the new car is much more your type of thing."

Pussy, annoyed with himself, began an apology. While he was still struggling through it she pressed his hand kindly, smiled at the rest, and drove off.

She had promised to come back for the evening party. Jerome was prepared to overlook the difficulties of shaving in front of a pocket mirror in anticipation of the evening ahead. From the lounge of the cabin the strains of the radiogram drifted; with satisfaction he noted that it was Victor Sylvester strict tempo—he wasn't any good at the fancy stuff.

But he was damped when, on asking Susan for a dance

at her re-arrival, she replied she'd rather not.

"But why not, sweetie?" urged Jane, now resplendent in flowered crepe. "You know you dance beautifully."

"I don't think it would be right, so soon after—after the accident."

"Oh, my dear girl—" But Jane didn't like to put her thought into words, which was that no-one here would censure her for a little innocent gaiety soon or late after the death of so unkind a husband.

Susan took up a place in a corner of the shabby room, which soon became the centre of interest for almost the entire male population. Though the other women had now changed into dresses too, Susan still outshone them. One of the two young German pilots was so smitten that he took his place, literally, at her feet, gazing up from there with worshipping Teutonic blue eyes. Pussy, who had failed to get a good in-fighting position, because of the young Werther's outstretched legs, took up a post on the opposite side of the room and registered sulky disapproval.

Perhaps because she was embarrassed by all this, Susan concentrated most of her attention on Jerome.

"How have you got on today?" she inquired.

"It's been very interesting," he said drily. "On two occasions at least I thought I was about to meet my Maker."

She studied him uncertainly. "I never know when you're serious."

"I am at this moment, I assure you. I had a couple of terrifying practical jokes played on me."

"Oh." Her glance went to Lucas who, in a shiny perspiration of enthusiasm, was looking after the dance music on the radiogram. "He is a silly boy." She turned to Bryan. "You'll have to take him in hand, Bryan. We can't have him playing tricks on Jerome."

Bryan looked as if there were a trick or two he'd like to try on Jerome himself, but muttered that he'd do his best. She gave him a momentary smile then resumed her interest in Jerome's day.

"How do you like Mollin? I kept wondering how you were getting on all morning until finally I decided to come down and see for myself."

"This is very flattering," he grinned, "but can it be true?"

"I was wondering what you thought about--you know --what Pussy and I spoke to you about yesterday."

"Oh, that," he said dismissively. "I told you gossip doesn't put me off."

She looked relieved. "I'm so glad," she said, leaning towards him so as to speak to him alone. "Perhaps, after all, the whole affair is receding into the past. I just hope so, at any rate. I'm trying so hard to put it all behind me—a new career, a new life—why, new clothes and a new car, even!"

He assured her he thought this a very sensible outlook and asked about the restaurant. In reply she talked well—not amusingly, but with great good sense and an occasional request for his opinion, which did no harm to his estimate of her good sense. After a while, on combined urging from Jerome and Jane, she agreed to dance with him. He thought she probably did so to get away from the admiring Teuton, whose steady stare was rather unnerving. Nevertheless she seemed to enjoy the dancing for itself. She danced really well, with the perfect precision and timing that comes from inborn ability.

"Ah, that was fun!" she cried when the record ended. "Richie and I so seldom went dancing, and he danced so badly."

"Then may I have the renewed pleasure—?"

The next tune was a nice dreamy slow foxtrot, which allowed plenty of time for talk. Jerome, in exchange for

her news about the restaurant, gave her a brief (and he thought, witty) review of life in the bookshop, and was in high feather when he actually got her to laugh aloud. Success, success! She had a sense of humour after all. Perhaps four years of unhappiness with Richard Denver had atrophied it. Perhaps it only needed help from the right person to revive.

He was in a glow of pride and self-congratulation when the dance ended. The little group of dancers on the tiny floor applauded and looked hopefully at Lucas. Jerome called, "Encore, encore! Same again, please, Lucas!"

Then his eye travelled beyond Lucas to a smudge of unrelieved black, and stayed there. Barbara Haskell had come in—how long before he couldn't say because he'd been too taken up with Susan to notice. There she sat, close by the radiogram, in a black poplin dress as sombre as her face. The reproach in her eyes was like that of a child who has discovered that there really is no Santa Claus, and who thinks it's your fault.

"What's the matter?" Susan said, seeing his expression change.

"Nothing. I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

"Only that I like that tune. It reminds me of the dear old days in Switzerland."

"Ah yes, I remember—you studied the hotel methods there. I imagine it was hard work?"

"It was, but the surroundings made it worth while. It was one of the best hotels in Switzerland."

He teased her about high life among the high mountains but his heart was no longer in it. He was almost glad to feel Pussy's touch on his shoulder as he cut-in. He made his way round the crowded room, stumbling over the legs of glider-enthusiasts still talking gliding, to Barbara's side. Lucas Mathewson, only a few feet away at the radiogram, came to attention.

"You seemed to be enjoying yourself," Barbara said in tones that didn't congratulate him for it.

"Yes, I was. I didn't see you arrive."

"I know you didn't. You were busy."

"This is a nice tune. Would you like to dance?"

"No thanks."

"Don't you like dancing?"

"I have a very good reason for not feeling in the mood."

He sat down beside her. Why she gave him this sense of guilt he didn't know, but he couldn't be easy until he'd cheered her up. Yet all the time he was speaking he could feel Lucas's glance burning the back of his neck.

"Several things have occurred to me—in both senses of the phrase—since I saw you last. I'd like to tell you about them."

"If you could come to the inn tomorrow morning you could tell me at the same time as meeting my father. He wants to talk to you."

"To me? What about?"

"He wouldn't tell me. He said he'd tell it the once and that would be the end of it."

"Have you any idea what it's about?"

"You'll find out tomorrow. That's if you can spare the time to come." She was heavily sarcastic.

"I have all the time in the world. I'm only here," he reminded her, "because you wanted me to come."

"Are you sure? Or is it because your curiosity was aroused by Susan's picture?"

He was still trying to think how to side-step that one when she broke out in low, emphatic tones, "I know she didn't love him any more, and perhaps never had loved him as I did. But she needn't be quite so eager to brush him aside, to start a new life. And with so much thoroughness, so much zest! I watched her drive up to The Silent

Woman, in her brand new French car and her brand new Italian dress."

"You're a better car-spotter than a fashion-spotter," he said, hoping to joke her out of her resentment. "The car's French but the dress isn't Italian and it isn't new."

She was so disappointed in him that she was prepared to make an issue of anything. "Do you think I'm such a fool that I don't even know the prize piece of the Galitzine collection when I see it?"

"Have it your own way," he said unwisely.

"You don't believe me, do you? I tell you that dress was shown to the public for the first time at the end of January, and it was made in Italy."

"All right, I give in. Now come and dance."

"You are infuriating!" she replied angrily. "You treat me as if I were three! Since you know so much more about it than I do, where and when was the dress made?"

He shrugged. He was beginning to get annoyed too—it was all too idiotic. "In a French factory, I imagine, sometime last year. Susan bought it in a little shop near the Place Pigalle last October."

Barbara nodded briefly and picking up a copy of "Aviation Magazine" which happened to be near, buried her nose in it.

Defeated, he withdrew. A sidelong glance at Lucas showed that he at least was pleased with this result, but he was still watching Jerome with an intensity that pricked at the skin like barbed wire. For the sake of peace and quiet, Jerome thought it better not to go near Barbara again that evening.

He danced with the other girls, and with Susan again. Perhaps he was growing hyper-sensitive to unfriendly scrutiny, but he noticed that neither Pussy nor Bryan—nor even poor old Alan Osbertson—liked it when he and Susan were together. He realized that he had monopolized

her earlier on. He was irritated with himself. He seemed to be putting his foot in it all round.

Somehow the evening went from bad to worse. When people drifted out to start the barbecue he found Susan at his elbow without any volition of his own. Pussy had said of her that she lacked perception and one might almost have said that she was bent on giving a demonstration of that lack. Couldn't she see that Pussy was glowering? And Bryan fidgeting? Probably she had never suspected Bryan's secret passion but any other woman, thought Jerome, would have noticed the atmosphere that was building up.

At last the party began to break up. Pilots who hoped to make an early start next day sought their beds. Susan said, "Well, I'd better get back to the inn."

"I'll drive you," Pussy said immediately.

"Oh, no, thanks, Puss dear. I've my own car."

"Let me come with you in that, then. I'd like to see how it runs."

"But then you'd have to walk all the way back, silly. No, no. I'll see you in the morning."

"But that's just it. I'm hoping to do the Cornwall flight in the morning."

"Oh, dear, I'd forgotten. Jerome's nonsense put it right out of my head! Then certainly you mustn't come to the inn with me and walk back. You need your sleep so as to be fresh for the morning. Goodnight, Puss."

She kissed him lightly on the cheek, kissed Jane and Alan Osbertson likewise. Then, to his amazement, she took Jerome by the elbows and standing on tiptoe, kissed him too. "Goodnight, Jerome dear, and thanks for making my evening so enjoyable."

Her car slipped away into the spring night. Other people exchanged goodnights and drove away. Lucas's old Landrover bounced across the parking space and

turned into the lane. Jerome looked around for Barbara's Jaguar but it was gone: he was still in disfavour, she had gone without a word.

He walked towards the Nissen hut at Pussy's side. To break a rather strained silence he said conversationally, "Got your retrieving team fixed up for tomorrow, Pussy?"

"I had, yes. The Mathewsons were coming. But they've both asked me to find substitutes. So in view of that—and other things—I don't think I'll go."

"What a pity. I—"

"I bet you think it's a pity!" Pussy said irritably, and stalked away.

Vexed with himself and everybody else, Jerome turned away from the men's sleeping quarters. The glow from the barbecue fire beckoned him. He roamed towards it; sat down by it cross-legged.

He had put a lot of people's backs up—Barbara, Pussy, Bryan Mathewson. He was rather sorry about Bryan, who seemed harmless and inoffensive. Well, let them be disapproving, if they must. What had he done?—made Susan smile, even laugh. Was it a crime? The poor girl deserved a bit of enjoyment after the sort of life she'd been through, and if her dress really was from an Italian couture house, well, good luck to her.

They took a rather proprietarial attitude towards Susan. It wasn't a good thing. If they really felt they had the right to run her life for her, it wasn't so unlikely that one of them had helped rid her of her greatest handicap, her husband.

If the accidental death of Richard Denver had been no accident, they all had a motive. And if the accident had been caused by intentional damage to the glider, all the men had the knowledge necessary to carry it out—Pussy, Bryan, Lucas, Alan Robertson. Pussy would have done it to get Susan for himself. Bryan had the double motive of

emotional and financial involvement. Alan's motive would be mainly financial, but he might have been envious of Denver's ability and a little in love, in a fatherly way, with Denver's wife. Fatally easy for a man with a shabby monetary motive to ennable it with the words, "It's not only for me, it's for Susan."

It was worth while thinking about Mrs. Osbertson too. Jane had a protective fondness for Susan and she had certainly hated and despised Denver. Whether she would go so far as actually to bring about his death was another matter. But she had the technical know-how, for someone who had rigged and derigged a sailplane as often as she had simply couldn't lack it. And besides, if the crash had been brought about by impairing, not the glider, but the pilot's ability, Jane was still on the suspect list. She could just as easily have slipped something into Denver's drink as anyone else. The fact that she herself had suggested this was a complication—unless she was diverting suspicion from damage to the glider. And talking of suspicion, there was another thought about Jane Osbertson that kept peeping in and out of his brain like a rabbit out of a conjurer's hat. But for the present he'd let it stay there.

Jane's suggestion that the pilot had been drugged was difficult to accept because it meant accounting for the fact that Denver was in full control of his flying skill at the time he pulled the yellow release knob and freed the cable, and yet five-to-ten minutes later was so stupefied he couldn't avert a crash. A very precise dosage, surely, to ensure such precision in results.

Yet it couldn't be dismissed, because Lucas Mathewson had access to toxic materials. He'd seen nicotine in the orchard shed. Nicotine was a deadly poison, and somewhere he had read that the first effect of a small dose was the onset of nausea: well, a pilot struggling with nausea couldn't be said to be in full control of his machine.

Suppose someone had discovered how easy it was to get into Lucas's shed? But then, surely nicotine's effects would be noticeable at post mortem? Why choose nicotine, though? That shed had poisons enough ranged on its shelves. He recalled to his mind the picture of the labels he had seen: he must ask an expert for an opinion on the substances.

Whichever method was favoured, Lucas remained near the top of the suspect list. He wished Susan well; he stood to gain financially if Denver died; above all he wanted Barbara. But one thing had to be borne in mind, Jerome reminded himself. If sabotage were the method, the work had to be done in the limited time between the Daily Inspection and the cockpit check. He must find out who had had opportunity.

If Lucas was at the top of the list, it was wound up by three names of people who had no motive or else no means: Vivian Haskell, Barbara Haskell, and Susan Denver. Vivian Haskell had motive but scarcely any opportunity and probably no expert knowledge where gliders were concerned. Barbara had no motive unless she had somehow discovered Denver's true feelings and killed him out of revenge—but then why call in help to track down the murderer? Susan might be said to have a motive—an unfaithful husband. But she seemed able to cope with him without growing angry, and if sabotage to the glider was considered, everyone agreed that she had no expert knowledge. As for poison, she had as much chance there as any of the others: but there still remained the unanswerable query, how to judge a dose of poison so exactly, and leave no trace for the pathologist?

Sighing, Jerome got out his cigarettes and put one between his lips. Then he lit a match and leaned forward over it as it spurted flame.

Something sped towards him through the air, something

small, momentarily glancing with light reflected from the fire.

Jerome ducked. A mistake. The thing—a stone, perhaps—plummeted in among the charcoal chips. The embers spattered upwards.

Agonizing little darts of fire struck him in the face. Red hot needles scratched at his eyes. He flung up his arms and fell back. He could smell burning. His jacket front was smouldering. He beat at it. The pain in his eyes burned.

There were footsteps, running footsteps, light, like someone on tiptoe. They were coming nearer. He could see nothing.

An odd sound now—like someone scraping up stones with a piece of metal. Almost like the hot coals being stirred—

“*No!*” shouted Jerome, and threw himself to one side.

He heard them shower in the air, felt the scorching heat as they scattered round him. He kept his arm up over his eyes.

The sound of running footsteps, moving away. And a burst of triumphant laughter—distant.

THIRTEEN

“KEEP still!” Jane was commanding.

“I am keeping still.”

“You aren’t, you’re wincing away from me.”

“Well, damn it, it hurts!”

“I know, boy, I know,” she said kindly. “I’m doing the best I can not to hurt but these little burns all over your cheekbones. . . .” She dabbed gently with her lotion-saturated cotton wool.

He squinted at her through eyes that watered and flickered, giving him a view as if through a rain-washed window. He was greatly relieved to discover he could see her at all, for during the first ten minutes he’d been terrifyingly convinced he was blinded. Even the tiniest speck of dust in the eyes is torture, and he had been showered with burning sparks. But instinct had come to his aid: he had closed his eye and protected them even as the projectile hit the fire, and so, though he had burns on the eyelids and marks like the smallpox on his face—and several button-sized holes burned in the front of his jacket—he could see.

“Now come on, own up!” Alan Osbertson said wrathfully to the group standing staring at the first-aid efforts in the club lounge. “Which one of you was it who played this silly, dangerous prank?”

Jerome didn’t expect any confession. And in fact no-one spoke.

“Speak up!” urged Alan, and for all his unimportant appearance his voice had authority now. “I shall find out, eventually, I warn you. I’m not letting behaviour like this go on while I’m chairman of this club.”

"You can't be sure it was a member," someone ventured from the back of his audience.

"That's right, it could have been an intruder."

"There's nothing to stop people just walking in."

"Remember last summer, someone pitched a tent during the week at the far end of the runway—"

The babble of voices grew. Jerome knew that nothing was going to be learned by prolonging the scene. Besides, he wanted to get away, out of the light which hurt his eyes, and if possible into a quiet place where he could catch the glancing mental picture which was tantalizing him for the moment. He murmured to Jane that he thought he'd like to get off to bed. Pussy, who was standing near and looking perturbed—as it his resentment of earlier on had gone sour on him—shook his head.

"Fat chance you've got of sleeping with your eyes giving you hell."

"What he needs is a sleeping pill. You've got some, haven't you, Bryan?" asked Jane.

"Not with me," Bryan returned. "They're at home."

One of the Germans offered codeine and went to fetch it. Once more people moved off towards their sleeping quarters. Bryan Mathevson—why was he still here?—climbed into a sedate, beautifully kept old Austin and drove away. The place settled down, slowly and rather warily, for the night.

Jerome's bed would have been hard in any case. But kept awake by the continual purgatory of his watering, stinging, burning eyes, he couldn't get comfortable in any position.

He was chasing the mental picture—something he ought to have recognized—something he had seen—just before the sparks flew up from the fire—

Would it be too late now? He pushed aside the ex-army blanket, and, pulling on some clothes and pocketing a

torch, went out quietly. The night was still. The club premises were entirely dark.

But the barbecue coals were not entirely dead, which was strange because it was some time since they had been tended. Unless what he suspected proved to be true. . . .

He hunkered by the fire and with a twig gingerly pushed aside the hot cinders. In the centre, in a little hollow, something shone with less blackness—~~shape~~ almost yellow in the light from the torch.

He hooked it out with the twig and let it fall on the ground. With the tip of his forefinger he turned it over. It was badly charred, but satinwood is slow-burning and the outline was still recognizable.

He was looking at the white queen from Bryan Mathewson's chess set.

He himself had handed the piece back to Bryan outside the Flying Instructors' Office. Unless Bryan's pockets had been picked again, who else but Bryan could have thrown it in the fire? Passionate rejection lay in that act. Susan had turned away from Bryan, had preferred someone else—then burn her, burn her in effigy! And if in the doing of it her favourite was hurt, so much the better!

Jerome understood now why the coals had been stirred — it was to inter the little carving deep in the fire. Sweeping the arm round to scatter some of the embers had been a secondary impulse, perhaps carried out only because Jerome was so near and so helpless, unable to see what was intended.

Jerome shivered. Bryan wasn't so unlike his brother Lucas after all. They were both impetuous—impetuous to the point of—to the point of near-insanity, perhaps also to the point of murder if pushed far enough.

He picked up the tiny figurine, still warm as it was, and wrapped it in his handkerchief. It was evidence, even if it was evidence only of furious jealousy.

After a wretched night Jerome got up very early, but even so the gliding enthusiasts were about, preparing for the day's flying. A pale grey-blue sky promised fine weather. The breeze was still cool, and felt refreshing on his smallpox-patches of burnt skin. Jane Osbertson could be heard banging pots and pans about in the kitchen. At the far end of the field the launching winch was being wound up and the tractor which pulled the cables was heading out from the hangars for the day's work. Alan Osbertson was standing on the porch outside the lounge, watching the first glider of the day prepare to take the air. He inquired anxiously how Jerome had slept.

"All right, thanks."

"I wish you could give me some idea of what really happened last night, Jerome. It's very worrying. Such irresponsible behaviour—"

"There's very little I can tell you." His fingers touched the carving in his pocket, still wrapped in the handkerchief. He had decided to say as little as possible. This affair lay between himself and Bryan Mathewson: until he had first spoken to Bryan alone, he would discuss it with no one.

"You don't think it was—intentional?" hinted Alan nervously.

"What makes you say that?"

"We-ell—things in this neighbourhood have been—there's been a lot of undercurrents. Jane told me she talked with you about it."

"About Denver's death? Yes."

"While not agreeing entirely with her theories, I'm beginning to be—rather worried. Mr. Chiford too . . . but then that was probably just his 'imagination.'"

"You mean that, looking back, you may have given a wrong judgment about the crash?"

Alan cleared his throat. "I said at the inquest that there

was no evidence to suggest a fault in the Polaris. Every item of damage could have been accounted for by the crash itself. Naturally I've heard some speculation from . . . others. . . . My main objection to it all is the time factor. Sabotage, if there were any, would have had to be carried out between the end of Denvei's inspection—which would be rigorous, I assure you—and the time the Polaris was taken out to be launched."

"But it's a possibility, isn't it. The gliders just stand around in the open, waiting to be pushed out." He nodded towards those already lined up on the airfield verge.

"Yes," sighed Alan, "it's true. All the same, I don't believe it could be done. To meddle with, say, the control cables, would be a lengthy job—that's if you were going to do it so it wouldn't be noticeable at take-off. *Sur'ly* someone would have noticed if one of the other pilots was messing around with the Polaris for half an hour?"

"Did you inquire if anything of that sort had been noticed?"

"Look at that fool!" Alan suddenly burst out, his gaze lifted towards the glider just climbing into the sky. "Just look at him!"

"What's the matter with him?" said Jerome, at a loss.

"I knew he wasn't ready to go solo. I told his instructor so!"

"He looks all right to me—flying nice and level—"

"Oh yes, beautiful! He's concentrating so hard on that, he's forgotten to release his cable."

"His first solo, you say?"

"Come on, you idiot!" Alan apostrophised the unhappy pilot. "Release it! You'll overfly the winch any second now!"

The glider was about a thousand feet up, directly overhead to the winch driver. As the aircraft passed beyond

the winch, the cable came away and dropped to the ground.

"Ah, he remembered," said Jerome.

"Not he. Thank God for back release." He turned back to Jerome. "What was I saying? Ah yes—about last night. You've no idea who it was?"

They had not been speaking of last night, but of opportunities for tampering with the Polaris. Wondering if the subject had been adroitly changed on purpose, he assured Alan that last night was a mystery: and before he could get back to the topic which interested him, Alan was called to the Flying Instructors' Office.

Breakfast was still some time off. Nice time for a walk. Besides, he still owed a visit to Mr. Clifford, owner of Mollin Ridge Farm.

He found the farmer, in Sunday ease, strolling round his pig pens. At sight of Jerome his pleased round face became startled.

"What's up with you, then? Got chickenpox?"

"No, it's nothing catching." He introduced himself and reminded Clifford of his invitation of the previous day. "You spoke of 'information'."

Clifford looked doubtful. "I dunno. Sometimes I think it's important, sometimes not."

"I know, it's difficult to tell in this case. You gave me the impression it was information that showed up Alan Osbertson in a poor light."

"Not quite. Only, when I told him what I'm just going to tell you and asked him if I ought to mention it to the police, he choked me off."

"You mean he was annoyed?"

"Scared, more like. Or anxious. Of course, that gliding club's the pride and joy of his life. He'd break his poor old heart if anything bad came out of it."

"You ~~actually~~ saw the crash?"

"Yes, I was in the four-acre field with Dwyer, my foreman. He was on the tractor but had switched off to talk to me. We saw Mr. Denver's glider. Right off, we said to each other it didn't look happy."

"You could tell?"

"Well, we see a good few, you know, being so near the club ground. This one was much too slow. After they're launched, I've noticed, they generally turn the nose down a bit until they reach the ridge." He nodded to the slope behind his farmhouse. "When they get there, they find a bit of an up-current or something. It helps them gain height. But not this one. Its nose was more up than down and it seemed awful slow. Then all at once it staggered in the air, and sort of turned round a bit."

"Stall and spin. Yes, go on."

"Oh, it didn't spin. Not what you'd call *spin*. It turned sort of half round. Mr. Oshertson was telling me once, these things were built so they wouldn't misbehave in the air, such as spin and all that. Though how you can tell before you build the thing, I can't fathom. Howsome-ever —where was I?"

"The glider had stalled and begun a spin but righted itself."

"Oh yes. Then it sort of swooshed towards the ground."

"It went into a dive." He had gone through exactly the same experience at Lucas's kind hands. "Yes?"

"I've seen them come down many a time. If they can't make it to their landing ground they aim for a nice smooth field. I was absolutely flummoxed when this one headed straight for the kalc. Dwyer was too."

"Yes, someone else mentioned that as being strange."

"By this time he was awful low and not so very far off. I could see the pilot's face pressed against the edge of his cockpit as he looked down. So I was thunderstruck when he didn't change direction so as to avoid the barn."

"You think he could have?"

"For sure he could have. They can steer those things just like a motor car. Mind you, even if he'd failed to hit the barn he'd have hit the fence, and it would still have been a nasty crash. But what I mean is, you'd think a man would automatically avoid a great big thing like that old stone barn of mine."

Jerome eyed Clifford. "Are you trying to say," he asked, "that you think it was deliberate?"

"I asked myself that, afterwards, and I tried to remember exactly which way he was looking. And you know, Mr. Aylwin—I've wondered maybe if his head was resting on the edge of the cockpit because he'd passed out?"

"Oh.h...." Could it be that Jane's theory was going to find support?

"You see, it's one of two things," argued the furmer, his face purling up in thought. "Either he was looking out and saw the barn but didn't bother, or else he'd had a black-out and couldn't see where he was going."

"What did your foreman think?"

"Oh, Dwyer's that shortsighted, he didn't make out the pilot's head. But there's nothing wrong with my sight. Mind, I couldn't see clearly, and it all happened so fast. . . . Maybe I'm making a mountain out of a molehill. What do you think?"

Jerome had to confess he didn't know what to think, refused a pressing invitation to stay to breakfast on the grounds that he already had a meal waiting for him at the club, and made his way back there. When the meal was over he volunteered to help in the kitchen. Once more Jane refused saying that he was a guest, not a member, but this time he insisted. He had 's reasons.

He outstayed the other helpers, two girls who had a date with the two-seater trainer.

"I have something for you," he said to Jane.

She looked an inquiry.

"This." He took out the cigarette box in which the carving and the snapshot had been sent to him, together with the half sheet of paper in which it had been wrapped.

"But—what on earth—"

"You sent me a message. I just wanted to let you know that I'd understood it."

She looked from his steady glance to the scrap paper in his hand. Try as she might to prevent it, she was colouring. All at once she gave in.

"How did you guess it was me?"

"You've been at the back of my mind ever since I opened the parcel. You had access to all the ingredients. You're always in and out of the lounge—you could easily slip a hand into a jacket hanging on the back of a chair. If you rummaged in the waste-paper-basket for an old cigarette packet or tore a piece off one of the notices, who would think it strange? Then it seemed to me that probably only someone more interested in people than in gliders would have recognized the features on Bryan's carving. You fitted the bill. Was it only when you saw the carving that you suspected his feelings for Susan, or had you always known?"

"I'd guessed some time ago—after his peculiar outburst in the lounge at New Year."

"I see. Then the message had to be from someone who wanted to draw attention to Bryan without drawing attention to herself. I thought of you because you wanted to distract attention from your husband—you didn't favour any theory involving damage to the glider, you wanted emphasis placed on the drug theory and last night you put in the clinching detail. You asked Bryan to let me have one of his sleeping pills, to advertise the fact that he had some."

"I knew he got them from his doctor. I've been in the

chemist in Beckenton when he collected the prescription."

"Will you tell me something? Why did you feel it necessary to let *me* know that Bryan had means and motive?"

"Because you were asking questions and I guessed you were a detective. Who hired you? Barbara's father?"

"Barbara's father?" he echoed in astonishment. "Why should he?"

"I don't know. When he came here that Saturday of Richie's crash, Mr. Haskell had quite a chat with me, and he said something about having had someone look into Richie's affairs. When you appeared here yesterday, I thought it must have been you he meant."

"But why should Haskell hire a detective to inquire into Denver's accident?"

"Maybe because of a bit of a guilt complex. He might have contributed to the accident — either because of the quarrel he had with Richie on the field just before take-off, or perhaps because, by refusing money to help Richie's finances, he'd pushed him to suicide. I don't believe either of those ideas are correct. If you'd known Richie, you'd know he'd never give in — never — and never admit defeat." She paused, and looked at Jerome. "You mean Mr. Haskell didn't send you here?"

"No, he did not."

"Oh," she gasped, her eyes filling with tears. "And I've brought out all poor Bryan's private feelings in front of you, and made myself look a terrible peeping Tom! Oh, how horrible!"

He spent ten minutes comforting her and assuring her that in any case he had himself guessed Bryan's feelings. When at last he left her, still sniffing rather tearfully, to peel the potatoes for lunch, he set off to see Vivian Haskell. Jane's mention of him had reminded Jerome of his appointment for this morning. One of the privately-owned

gliders had gone on a goal flight to Winchester, so he was able to cadge a lift from the retrieving team which was just setting out. He was put down at the crossroads just outside the village.

As he walked towards the inn he saw Susan Denver come out of the little newsagent's shop, the Sunday papers tucked under her arm. He called. She stopped, turned, and her face lit up.

"Jerome! Fancy seeing you here so early!"

"Early? I don't call nine-thirty early!"

"Don't you? I think it's—" She broke off, and hurried to come close and look at his scarred face. "*Jerome!* What—"

"It's all right—don't be alarmed. I had an accident with some sparks from the fire."

"But it looks so red and painful—"

"It isn't much fun, but I shan't die of it--?"

She had urged him along until they were now at the forecourt of The Silent Woman. She sank down on the low wall that bordered it, pulling him down with her. Leaning towards him, so close he could see the faint dark down between her brows and smell the flower fragrance of her cosmetics, she put up a hesitant hand to touch the little patches of burnt flesh about his eyes.

"Oh, how dreadful. Where did it happen? I wish I'd known—I'd have come back to the club. Why didn't you phone me?"

He felt a dreadful fraud and tried to explain that there was very little wrong with him except that his eyes ached. In fact, even her touch, light and cool though it was, bothered him. He captured her hand and brought it away from his face.

And this is how they were sitting when Bryan Mathewson drove up. He drew to a stop, sat for a moment in contemplation of them, then jumped out and marched up.

"Don't you think this sort of behaviour is a bit out of place so early on a Sunday morning?"

Susan was perplexed. "What's the matter, Bryan? You look quite upset."

"I'm not upset. I just don't like to see you making an exhibition of yourself."

Jerome was alarmed, not for himself but for Susan. He knew from experience that Bryan could get frightening impulses. He didn't want Susan subjected to anything similar to his own experience. He said, trying to keep it light, "If this is an exhibition, it's a pleasant one, wouldn't you say?"

"Pleasant? Who for? You come here," choked Bryan, "and walk off with Susan without a by-your-leave—"

"Now, please, Bryan," Susan put in soothingly, "people are staring at us."

"I don't care about that! You're to understand once and for all—"

"Now, now," she said, and her tone was ruffled, "you've no right to speak to me like that."

"No right? You can't really be so stupid! You *know* I have a right—who better?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Think!" he commanded. "Think hard! And then you'll realize what you owe me, what I've done for you!"

FOURTEEN

"Now what exactly did he mean by that?" wondered Jerome aloud as they watched Bryan stride back to his car.

"Goodness knows." She shook her head in dismay. "He's always been such a quiet little man. I'd better go and talk to him."

"No, Susan—please don't—he's hardly in control of himself—"

"I think I'd better. We can't have him going around in that over-wrought state. You won't mind if I leave you?"

He remembered that the real reason for coming into the village was to call on Barbara Haskell's father. He could in any case hardly prevent Susan from speaking to Bryan if she insisted. He stood back to let her hurry across the street. She said a word to Bryan. There was a colloquy. Bryan nodded towards Jerome, apparently stating that he objected to being watched. Susan patted his arm, got into the car beside him, and was driven away.

"You'll realize what you owe me, what I've done for you!" Those had been Bryan's words. Was he implying that he had freed her from her troublesome husband? And was that what Susan understood him to mean? She had seemed bewildered at first by the outburst, then worried, and finally understanding, at least in part, had come to her. Later, Jerome hoped, she would explain the whole affair to him.

When he asked for Vivian Haskell the elderly receptionist eyed him with interest. Possibly she was wondering how he came to be on calling terms with such a very wellknown rich man: possibly she was thinking that every

time Jerome appeared in the forecourt there was a scene of some kind: possibly she was just wondering where he got those marks on his face.

She said, "Mr. Haskell and his daughter are just having breakfast. Will you wait?"

"Thank you." He sat down on the chair by the reception desk.

"Do you happen to know if Mrs. Denver will be back soon from ~~her~~ drive?"

"I couldn't say," he replied. He himself was wondering on that point.

"Only, you see, she ordered breakfast before she went out to buy the papers. . . ."

"I don't think she and Mr. Mathewson had any notion of going far."

"Mr. Mathewson? Would that be a relative of the gentleman who reserved her room for her?"

"His brother."

"Fancy! He's not very like him, is he?"

Jerome rubbed his nose with his forefinger and tried to catch hold of a thought which had just winged past.

"Did you just say—"

"Oh, here is Mr. Haskell now."

He came out of the inn dining room with Barbara's arm through his, a florid, good-natured-looking man in his late fifties, with brown eyes like his daughter's but sharp and undeceived whereas hers were timid. From Barbara's initial attitude it was clear they had witnessed the by-play outside from the dining room window.

"If you're going to stage a love-scene, you might at least—" She stopped. Her rancorous expression changed. She did exactly the same as Sean—she stepped close and peered up at him, touching the burn marks with the tips of her fingers. "What are those marks? Why, Jerome, they're ~~burns~~ burns!"

"Scars of battle. You said your father wanted to talk to me?"

"Jerome, has anybody done anything about those?"

"Yes, thanks, Jane's been playing ministering angel."

"But oughtn't you—"

"Don't fuss, Barbara," her father put in bluffly. "Can't you see you're embarrassing the poor chap? Come on upstairs, Jerome. I've a word or two to speak to you."

"And I've something to show you," Barbara said over her shoulder as she led the way.

Before he could ask what, she had disappeared into a room at the top of the stairs. Her father led Jerome into the one adjoining and waved him to a cretonne-covered armchair.

"Barbara told me yesterday afternoon that she'd called on your help," he began. "I've been abroad, so it was the first I'd heard of it."

"Quite."

"I begged her to come to Australia with me but she wouldn't. I had to go - my firm's negotiating a big contract for a power station and things had got stuck. Barbara 'wasn't on speaking terms' with me, presumably because of the quarrel I'd had with Denver and because I wouldn't rescind my opinion of him."

"From what I've heard of him, you could have done nothing else but quarrel with him."

"Hah!" barked Haskell angrily. "That blackguard. . . . And now I get home and find she's been worrying herself sick over the crash."

"Women," sighed Jerome. "Aren't they a problem?"

"My woman is," agreed Haskell. "I wish I'd had a son, not a daughter. I could have taken a stick to him. . . . Ah well. The point is, she's got no need to give herself these foolish nightmares, about Denver's accident."

His room door opened and Barbara came in, a fashion

magazine open in her hand. She thrust it at Jerome. "There you are!" she said crossly.

"What?"

"That picture." She put her finger on the photograph of a terrifyingly elegant model girl in a wool dress. "It's the model Susan is wearing this weekend."

"And I thought it was something important," he laughed.

"But it *is* important to me. You wouldn't believe me last night when I said the dress was a model from the Galitzine collection, and there it is—Harridges have imported the entire show."

"Well, all right, it's from the Galitzine collection and she bought it at Harridges."

"And she bought it this month—not last October. That dress wasn't even made last October. It beats me why she should say it was—and in a ready-to-wear shop at that—it's absurd."

"Probably she didn't want to make poor Jane Osbertson jealous."

"But you do see that I was right?" she insisted.

"I give you best," he agreed, bowing in humble obeisance.

Barbara's father disregarded her interruption. "I hear you took an intelligent interest in my daughter's idea that Denver died as a result of malice, aforerethought."

Jerome hesitated. "I was very interested in what Barbara said," he admitted.

"Aylwin, I want this business cleared up." He nodded towards his daughter. "For Barbara's sake, so that she can stop brooding over the past. I hear the idea is that someone did something or other to some vital part of Denver's glider after the overhaul and before the launch—have I got it right, pet?"

"That's right, Daddy."

"My hat, I wish you'd confided all this to me before I left for Australia, instead of waiting to tell it all to a stranger after my back was turned. No offence to you, Aylwin—you seem to have handled the whole thing very discreetly. But I'm in a position to knock the whole thing for six."

"You?"

"Yes, me. Now listen to me, Aylwin, I remember that day very well, very well indeed. On the Friday Barbara had approached me about putting money into this scheme of Denver's for a new type of glider. I'd been rather dissatisfied with one or two rumours I'd heard already about Denver and I'd—well—I'd—" He licked his lips and glanced anxiously at his daughter.

"You'd had inquiries made?" Jerome said cautiously.

"Daddy, you didn't!" she broke out when he nodded. "Do you mean you had a beastly private detective snooping into Richie's affairs? Oh, how could you! Sometimes I think you're—"

"I knew you wouldn't like it, pet," he sighed. "That's why I didn't want to tell you yesterday. I thought I'd get it out in front of a witness and then you couldn't make too much of a scene."

At this rather adroit piece of statesmanship Barbara's anger lost its force; she glanced uncertainly at Jerome, who was careful to guard his expression. Then she sank back in her chair and was silent.

"He wasn't a private detective, as a matter of fact. He was one of the security men from the firm. He made a few discreet inquiries. He came to me with the story that Denver was in a financial pickle and that the scandal-mongers were saying he was after Barbara for her money—"

"It's not true!" she interrupted, despite her previous determination not to make a scene.

This time her father shouted her down. "You say I'm biased against him," he roared, "but by God, haven't I good reason? A married man with a fine wife who did everything to make him happy—lent him her money, took an interest in this gliding business, lived a life of positive penury to please him. And what does he do? Seduces—shake your head if you like but what the hell else can I call it? Seduces a kid of nineteen for her money—"

"Excuse me," Jerome put in firmly. He could see Barbara on the verge of a storm of tears. "Denver's motives are neither here nor there just at present. What I want is facts. You said you were in a position to—"

"Yes, yes, of course, I'm sorry." Haskell wiped his face with a silk handkerchief and composed himself for the rest of his recital. "Well, she came to me that Friday, and I soon got the whole sorry story out of her. Until that moment I hadn't realized that she—that—well, I was furious. Her version was that Denver's wife wouldn't divorce him therefore she and Denver were justified. Damned immoral nonsense. And *this* was the man she wanted me to help! I can tell you, I was determined to put a stop to it. I made her take me with her to the gliding club next day and I made it my business to speak to Denver."

"I heard you'd had words with him," Jerome murmured.

"I expect you have. But the point is, I had *two* conversations with him." A grin split his square-jowled face. "You should have seen the bastard's expression! The first time, I mean. He fully expected to hear me say I'd subsidize his business to the tune of five or ten thousand, I really do believe. By heaven, I soon put him right."

"When and where was this?"

"It was about eleven in the morning. He arrived earlier, I think, but I didn't see him until eleven. He was

coming out of a hut on the side of the driveway—

“The instructors’ hut?”

“I believe so. He was carrying a book with a red cover and I fell into step with him. Very affable, he was, and when I said I’d like a word with him he led me to the hangar. While we were talking he was checking over the glider he eventually crashed in, and making little check marks in the book.”

“The Daily Inspection book.”

“That was what he called it, I think. He did one or two items, and then it dawned on him that I wasn’t friendly disposed. So he put the book in the cockpit while we argued. We hadn’t got very far before a pimply-faced youth in a flying-suit came in and began to act the eager-beaver—could he watch Denver make the inspection and so forth.”

“So you went away?”

“No, I stood beside this lad - Piglet, Denver called him, but that can’t really be his name—and we watched Denver make his check. I’ll give him this—he was extremely competent and thorough. This lad asked questions, and Denver explained everything—”

“Did Piglet touch any of the controls or fittings?”

“Absolutely not. He and I just stood side by side with our hands in our pockets watching Denver. I was waiting for the boy to clear off, d’you follow, so as to finish what I was saying to Denver. But then Osbertson arrived, and all three pushed the glider out on the field.”

“Did anyone have the opportunity to meddle with it while it was being pushed?”

“No. No, I was strolling along just behind them. Denver was holding the wings level, Osbertson was pushing at a little bar near the tail, and Piglet was at the outside edge of one of the wings and pushing there. They didn’t have far to go to the edge of the field. Piglet picked up one of

the tyres lying around and weighted the wing with it. Denver seized the opportunity to make his escape with Osbertson."

"So what did you do?"

"I waited. This lad Piglet told me that Denver was definitely scheduled to fly this glider during the morning because it was needed back in operation for the afternoon. I knew if I waited there, he had to come back. Maybe he thought he kept out of my way by dodging round the airfield and the buildings, but he was mistaken. All I had to do was wait, and I waited. Piglet and I made ourselves comfortable on a couple of the old tyres and we chattered quite like old pals for about an hour or so."

"Piglet was actually there all the time? Beside you?"

"Yes, he was. He was keen to see this glider go through its test flight because he hoped to go solo in it in the afternoon."

"Did anyone have the opportunity to meddle with it at that time?"

"Not a soul touched it. There weren't many people at the club that day and they all had jobs on hand. I just waited. It was a bit cool and I could have done with a drink by the time he came back, but I didn't get where I am in the world today, Aylwin, by being impatient."

"So Denver came back. Then what happened?"

"He got a bit of a shock when he saw me still there, I imagine. Still he carried it off well. They shoved the glider out to the launching place, with me tagging along behind like an obedient pup. Nobody did anything except push, Aylwin," he interjected as Jerome opened his mouth. "I'll take my oath on that. Well, then most of the people scampered back to the club house as fast as they could—Barbara tells me it's because of the cables—"

"Yes," Barbara put in, "once the cables are out you're not supposed to walk *across* the field. They wanted to get

back before the tractor brought out the cables, because naturally it's quicker to run across a field than to walk all round. Besides, Lucas had promised to show us his new card tricks."

"I see. Go on, Mr. Haskell."

"The Polaris stood there. The tractor came out, and stopped a few yards away. The driver got off and detached something from a bar at the back of the tractor—"

"The cables," Barbara put in.

"He laid the cables down on the ground in front of the launching site—"

"Not touching the Polaris?"

"Never touching the Polaris. Then he got straight back on his tractor and drove back to the winch. I was beginning to get really rattled, because Denver was keeping close to the two people left on the airfield —this young fellow Piglet, and Denver's own wife. I suppose he thought I wouldn't tackle him in front of his wife, but I was past caring by this time. I went round the side of the aircraft and said to Denver that he wouldn't get a penny from me for his factory, and that I was going to send Barbara abroad."

"What happened?"

"He really got my goat. I suppose he put on an act for his audience. He looked all puzzled and innocent, and I went for him."

"Did you actually hit him?"

"No, blast him, he was taller than me and he just swayed back out of reach. Then I grabbed his flying suit and gave him a bit of a heave, but he pulled himself free. Then this lad Piglet, nearly weeping with embarrassment, hauled me off and stammered a word or two about Mrs. Denver being present—poor girl, she was standing there looking dazed—"

Jerome sighed and shook his head. "Not a pleasant

moment for her. Well, what came after Piglet had separated you?"

"I stood there looking a bit of a bloody fool, I suppose, and then I apologized to Mrs. Denver. I must say she was absolutely marvellous. She said to the youngster, 'Go and pick up the signal bat' and he trotted off about twenty yards and thankfully busied himself with something there. Denver went and climbed into his aircraft. I wish I could say he looked rattled—I'd like to think I made *some* impression on the blighter—but he looked perfectly serene. Mrs. Denver took me by the arm and walked me some of the way round the field. She said she'd heard the gossip about my daughter and Denver and it was very distressing, but that she would do her utmost to bring the affair to an end. But the point of all this, Aylwin, is that I had the glider under observation the entire time and no-one tampered with it."

Jerome looked at Barbara. "That puts paid to your theory, then."

She could only nod agreement.

So there had been nothing wrong with the glider. But there was evidence that all had not been right with the pilot—Farmer Clifford's account couldn't be dismissed. And then those extraordinary words of Bryan's—"You'll realize what you owe me, what I've done for you!"

"Did you happen to see Bryan Mathewson at all during the morning?"

"Yes, a little later, when I went back to the cabin. I stayed to watch the launch from about halfway round the field. Then Mrs. Denver—"

"You actually watched the launch? Did Denver seem to make a good take-off?"

"I'm hardly a judge, am I? As far as I remember, he sat in the cockpit apparently moving controls. First the tailfin and the wing pieces moved—"

"Rudder and elevator and aileron check," Barbara supplied.

"Then the boy Piglet got down on his back just under the nose of the glider—"

"Checking and then fitting on the towing cable."

"Yes, well, then off he trotted to pick up his signal bat while Mrs. Denver stood by the cockpit. I daresay her husband was trying to find out what she'd been saying to me—"

"Daddy, you're so unfair! Besides, you don't have conversations like that just before the launch. More likely she was fitting his perspex hood over the cockpit."

"Just as you like, my dear. At any rate by the time Piglet had picked up his signal bat and attracted the attention of the lad working the winch, Mrs. Denver had picked up the wing of the glider and was holding it level. I hear her call "Take up slack" or something like that, and the lad with the bat gave a signal to the winch. Then she called something else and next minute the glider was off."

"A good take-off? Smooth?"

"As good as all the gliders I'd watched that morning."

"And at the top of the launch—when he was ready to fly off—he released the cable?"

"Just that. I suppose he had got up to an angle of about ninety degrees."

"Damn it all," groaned Jerome. "Everybody hints about foul play, but you say he was perfectly okay when he climbed into the glider and he made a perfectly satisfactory take-off. Your evidence disposes once and for all of the suspicion that the glider was at fault. Well, go on."

"About what?"

"I'd just like to know about Bryan Mathewson."

"Oh, him. Well, I saw Mrs. Denver walking round the

field with Piglet, so I waited for them. I remember thinking that it would have been a damn sight better if Denver, instead of putting his money into business ventures, had put it on his wife's back. She was wearing one of those duffel coats and had her shoulders hunched against the breeze—it wasn't a warm day by any means—and her hands in her pockets. I mean, she looked attractive—I imagine she always does—but still, it wasn't even a new duffel coat."

"And then you walked back to the club house for lunch?"

"That was the intention. Denver was due to land again in about half an hour, by which time the trainee pilots would have eaten and would be waiting to push the Polaris back to the launch point. I believe I'm right in saying Piglet was one of those. He rushed in to have his lunch. Mrs. Denver and I followed more slowly—I was glad of the chance to make a fuller apology for my bad behaviour and in return she gave me a new assurance that—well, I needn't go into that."

"Had you reached the club before the news of the accident was phoned through?"

"Yes, but only just. As far as I remember, we paused for a moment by Mrs. Denver's car. Now why was that? Oh yes—she had his knitted cap in her pocket and wanted to put it in the glove compartment."

"His cap? Why wasn't he wearing it?" asked Barbara.

"I've no idea. Did he always?"

She shrugged, unable to say for sure. Jerome said, "If it was cold you'd think he'd want it. It's damn draughty up aloft, from my experience. Well, never mind about that. You stopped at her car, she put the cap in the glove compartment—yes, then what?"

"We walked into the club lounge. We'd only been inside a moment when the phone rang. I think the phone rings

both in the office and the lounge, Barbara? Yes, I thought so. There was nobody in the office so Alan Osbertson took the call in the lounge. He went white as a sheet. Then he turned round and blurted out that Denver had crashed."

"Who were you looking at when the news was given? Whose face could you describe?"

"No-one's, I'm afraid. Except Mrs. Denver, who looked incredulous. I don't think any of us took it in. Then—and here comes the bit about Bryan Mathewson—he said he would go and turn her car for her. I remember it was facing the wrong way for a quick drive out."

"He seemed all right?"

"Well, he just seemed anxious to help. I seem to remember Susan protesting she could do it herself, but Bryan ran out and started her car for her."

"Did you go with them to the scene of the accident?"

"No, I didn't. I felt it was none of my business and I'd only be in the way."

"I went," Barbara said in a dead voice.

"Could you describe what took place?"

"Must I?"

"Not if you don't want to."

"What do you want to know?"

"If you can, I'd like to hear what impression you got when the news of the crash came through, and what was said or done that struck your attention either then or afterwards."

She sat with her head bowed for a while. Then she looked up. "We all just looked thunderstruck when Alan told us Richie had crashed. We didn't know then if he was badly hurt or what. There was a bit of a muddle about getting into cars and all that. Bryan started Susan's car for her. She got in as soon as he'd turned it round. Alan and Jane and I piled in the back. Lucas didn't come, neither

did Piglet nor anyone else, as far as I remember. Nobody said a word on the drive."

"And when you reached the field where the Polaris had crashed?" he prompted gently.

"An ambulance was coming up the main road as we drove in. It came in just behind us. Mr. Clifford wouldn't let Susan go to the scene of the crash until the ambulance men had got there first and taken Richie's body out. We stood to one side and watched them carry it past. It was — was — covered with a blanket. Right over. That was when we knew."

There was a silence in the room.

"It's funny you should have been asking so particularly about Bryan," she went on in a cracked, hurt voice. "He was the first one of us to speak. He said, 'My God, he's *dead!*' as if it had suddenly come down out of the sky and hit him, and he couldn't bear it."

"Did anyone else speak?"

"No-one. Alan put his arm round Susan and led her back to the car. Jane followed. I just stood there, and so did Bryan."

"Did you look at him?"

"Yes," she said slowly, making an effort of memory. "Yes, now I remember, I did."

"What was he doing?"

"He was standing with his hands together almost as if he were praying. He had his head bent. Then when I moved to go to the car, he looked up."

"And how did he look?"

"He looked," she said perplexedly, "he looked— guilty."

FIFTEEN

THE Mathewson brothers. It came back again and again to the Mathewsons. And there was another question about them that he wanted answered. When he came downstairs to wait for Barbara to drive him back to the gliding club, Jerome made for the receptionist's desk. She put down the tablemat she was crocheting and looked attentive.

"When I came in about half an hour ago—do you remember?"

"Mrs. Denver had just driven away with Mr. Mathewson's brother—yes, I remember of course." She simpered. "Mrs. Denver hasn't returned yet, if that was what you wanted to know, sir."

"Did you say it was Mr. Bryan or Mr. Lucas Mathewson who was concerned in booking Mrs. Denver's room for her?"

"Mr. Lucas Mathewson—that was the name. A burly gentleman. There isn't any complaint about the room, is there?" She looked suddenly anxious. "We couldn't give her either of the two best ones, as she wished, but really Number 3A is just as good, only not at the front of the building."

"There's no complaint," Jerome said. "Were you on duty when Mrs. Denver phoned?"

"When Mrs. Denver phoned?" She was puzzled now. "When was that, sir?"

"When the room was reserved."

"Oh. Oh, Mrs. Denver didn't phone us, sir. I must have misunderstood you. It was Mr. Lucas Mathewson who phoned Mrs. Denver."

"Are you sure?" Jerome said, trying not to look as confused as he felt.

"Oh, quite sure. Mr. Lucas came driving up in a tearing hurry yesterday afternoon and asked to see Miss Haskell—another lovely lady," she added parenthetically. "Well, it so happened that Miss Haskell's father had just that moment arrived so Mr. Lucas couldn't see her. He stamped out and got into his Landrover. Then, after sitting there a minute, he came in again and went into the call-box." She nodded towards the public phone on the other side of the room. "I know he must have made a toll call because he had to put extra money in. Then after talking a minute or two he left the phone off the hook and came over to reserve the room for Mrs. Denver. I told him she couldn't have either of the two best rooms, which she had asked for, because Miss Haskell had one and her father had just taken the other. So he booked 3A for her and then went back to the phone. It was just for the weekend, sir," she added rouguishly, "if that's what you wanted to find out."

"Thanks a million," said Jerome, and went out to wait in the sunshine.

Lucas phoned Susan? Why? It would have been less surprising if Bryan had done so—but Lucas? A girl like Susan and a man like Lucas? And besides, Lucas was head over heels in love with someone totally different. That wasn't a pretence. To suppose there was any connection at all between him and Susan—!

Barbara came out while he was still trying to make sense of this extraordinary piece of information. She said as they drove to the club ground, "I've decided, Jerome, that I'm out of my depth now. I thought it was Pussy who—who—But nobody did anything to the Polaris and I really think it must have been a wild dream I was having."

"In other words, you don't want any more inquiries made?"•

"That's right. I'm going back to the club now to say my goodbyes, and after that I shan't bother any of them again."

Jerome drifted with her aimlessly as she went from one to the other, but after a while decided he'd rather have the company of his own thoughts. He threw himself prone on the edge of the field and watched the gliders take off and land.

It was a good flying day and the pupils in the two-seater trainer and the single-seater were getting good value for their money. Eleven pupils clustered at the far end of the field, cheerfully retrieving the gliders as they completed their circuits and offering unhelpful advice to each nervous new pilot. Occasionally their laughter and ironic cheers were carried to him on the breeze. It was from the single-seater that adventure could be expected. Once the pilot appeared to change his mind after giving the "all-out" and the launch had to be stopped in mid-course. And once the pilot—a different one, wearing a very dashing electric blue cap—forgot to release his cable until he was flying almost beyond the winch.

Jerome thought that if he ever took up glider-flying he'd like somewhat fewer "helpers" round the launching point. Surely all those peasants were unnecessary? When Jerome had had his eventful flight with Lucas there had only been two others at the launch; and again when Denver was launched, there were only two helpers. But of course the more peasants, the more fun; and people took up gliding for fun.

Jerome rolled over to find a more comfortable position. The sun immediately got in his smarting eyes and made them water. Swearing to himself, he sat up and mopped them.

"Crocodile tears?" asked an ironic voice.

He looked up. It was Pussy Catt.

"Hello. You decided not to make the flight west."

"It's not important." Pussy's manner was divided between restraint and curiosity. "Have you—have you happened to see Susan this morning?"

"I've seen her in passing."

"Passing in which direction? I rang the inn, but they told me she wasn't there."

"Probably still out for her pre-breakfast trip in Bryan Mathewson's car."

Pussy frowned. "I don't think that's funny."

"How odd. I thought it very funny. Meaning funny peculiar."

"You don't seriously mean—?"

"Yes, I assure you."

"But she *hates* that old car of Bryan's."

Jerome clambered to his feet. "It can't seem stranger to you than it does to me. He was acting peculiar and Susan felt it her duty to soothe him down. Look, Pussy, this weekend's flying has come a bit unstuck, hasn't it? I've messed up your plans, and to tell the truth my eyes are giving me hell."

"I'm sorry about that business last night—" Pussy began remorsefully.

"Save it. The fact of the matter is, though, that I can't take any lessons in flying a glider when I can't even see the horizon. So if you don't mind I'll push off home."

"Oh—well—I quite understand—Just give me a quarter of an hour and I'll—"

"Look, I'm not asking you to drive me back. I can cadge a lift from Barbara. You stay, old son," Jerome said wearily, "and ask Susan what she means by going joy-riding with Bryan Mathewson."

He collected his gear from the Nissen hut. Lucas Mathewson watched him sling it in the back of the Jaguar, and stalked forward to demand what this might mean. But

Barbara, arriving at that moment, provided the answer.

"I'm taking Jerome back to Town because he got his face and eyes a bit burnt last night—"

"But how on earth—?"

"Never mind, it happened after you'd gone home. But naturally Jerome doesn't feel like flying, and as I'm going home he may as well come with me. *I'm* going back to London because, as you said yesterday, it's time I stopped brooding about the past."

"You mean—you don't feel the same about—about him?"

"I don't know how I feel. I only know I want to get away from Mollin Ridge and never see it again."

"Barbara! You don't mean that?"

"I'm afraid so, Lucas. This is goodbye."

"Oh no! Please, Barbara--"

"I'm sorry I made you angry yesterday, Lucas. That business of necking in the car with Jerome was all make-believe."

"But you *had* met him before he came here."

"Yes, on business. I asked his help in trying to find out if there was anything underhand about the accident that killed Richie."

Jerome had realized that she was about to give this information and kept his attention on Lucas. It seemed to him that Lucas wasn't as surprised as might have been expected. He turned apologetically to Jerome.

"Sorry I behaved so badly to you. You must have thought I was cracked."

Jerome smiled and passed it off. He was thinking that the natural reaction to Barbara's information would have been some such remark as "You're a detective, then?" The fact that Lucas made no such query seemed to imply that he already knew who Jerome was.

But Lucas, of course, was so overset at the news of

Barbara's departure that he wasn't paying proper attention to anything else. He said now imploringly, "Let me come to see you in London then, Barbara."

"If you like," she said unwillingly, and got into the car.

She insisted on taking Jerome to the family doctor in London after dropping her father at their flat. The doctor didn't seem best pleased at being called to his surgery just as he was about to sit down to his Sunday lunch, but he was efficient and quick. Soon Jerome was being deposited on his own doorstep. Barbara insisted on coming in with him and examining the contents of his refrigerator to see if it was true that he had plenty in stock for lunch. Satisfied at length, she took her leave.

As he closed his front door on her, his phone began to ring. It was Susan Denver.

"Jerome? They've just told me at the club that you left for home. Are your eyes hurting?"

"Not now. I've been to a doctor and I'm all spotted with soothing ointment like a leopard."

"I think you were wise not to think of taking flying lessons."

"I didn't go down to the club to take flying lessons," he said, and listened anxiously for her reply.

"You didn't?" she said in astonishment. "Then why?"

"Barbara Haskell wanted help in investigating your husband's death."

"I don't understand—I can see that Barbara might—But why should she ask *you*?"

"Because she imagined I'd make a good detective."

"Had she met you before you came—I mean—Jerome, was it an accident that brought you to my restaurant, or did she send you?"

"She didn't send me." That at least was true.

"Oh, I'm so glad, Jerome. I'd hate to think—Well,

never mind, what I really rang to say was that Bryan was quite all right after I left him."

"Was he indeed. Did he explain what he meant by that cryptic remark about what you owe him?"

"No, he got in a terrible fluster when I questioned him so I thought it better not to press it. Poor man. It's really dreadfully embarrassing for me, Jerome, because you see—the reason for all this upset is. . . ."

"He's in love with you."

"Well, yes."

"You had never suspected?"

"Never. I knew he—he liked me. But then—'

"There's nothing unusual in that? Quite right."

"But at any rate, Jerome, we can forget that dreadful scene this morning. I've made it clear to him he mustn't speak to me like that. I won't take that tone from anyone, and certainly *not* from Bryan Mathewson."

"I'd still like to know what he meant."

"It would be far better just to forget the whole thing."

"No, I don't think so. There are two points I'd like to settle with Bryan Mathewson."

"Two? What do you mean?"

"Never mind. I'll wait till I see him again."

"Jerome, I hope you won't upset him—"

"I hope *he* won't upset *me*. I've had reason to think poorly of the Mathewsons, one way and another."

"Oh, dear, you do sound grim. Don't let's talk about that any more. Will you be free on Tuesday evening?"

"Tuesday? Yes, I shall."

"Would you like to come and sample the restaurant cooking? I'm hoping to open the downstairs part on Wednesday, and this will be in the nature of a trial run. Say you'll come."

"Try it on the dog first, eh? I'd love to come."

Flattered, he hung up. But the pleased grin faded from

his ointment-smudged face as he thought about Bryan Mathewson. He would have given a great deal to know what Bryan had meant, and why Lucas had telephoned to Susan. What was the connection between the two brothers and Susan?

He was still worrying about them when he arrived at the "Green Air Restaurant and Espresso Bar." He wasn't so much worried, as puzzled, to find them both there ahead of him, among a small crowd of guests. Pussy Catt was there too, more at his ease than he had been over the weekend. In fact he was more in keeping with the surroundings and with the other guests than were Bryan and Lucas. Their shabby evening clothes picked them out as "un-smart."

"She must think very highly of them," Jerome told himself, "to include them in this gathering."

She hurried forward to greet Jerome and then said in aside, "I particularly want you to talk to Bryan. Go into my office—" she nodded towards a lilac-painted door—"and I'll send him in to you."

Reluctant but obedient, he went into the office. Bryan came in almost at once, looking desperately embarrassed.

"Susan and I had a long talk and she said you said I had—" He broke off, confused by his own efforts. "You told her you had two points you'd like to clear up with me. Of course the first is about what I said to her on Sunday morning. I've refused to explain to Susan but I've told her I don't mind explaining to you."

"Well?" Jerome said unhelpfully.

"It's just that I lent her husband money."

"How much?"

"I don't think there's any need to go into that. It's enough to say that without the money I lent him Denver would have been unable to fly in the competitions in France last year."

To Jerome's way of thinking, this denoted a debt owed by Denver, not by Denver's wife. To reproach Susan with "You'll realize what you owe me, what I've done for you!" on those grounds was absurd. He was sure he wasn't hearing the true reason. But Bryan was speaking again.

"What was the other point you wanted to talk to me about?"

Jerome felt in his breast pocket and took out his pocket-book. From this he extracted the half-burnt figurine. He held it out to Bryan.

"Oh," Bryan said faintly. To Jerome's ears, it sounded like *relief*.

There was a pause. Then Bryan stammered, "I owe you a very humble apology. I can only say I—I wasn't responsible for what I was doing when I threw that."

"I believe that, at least," he replied drily.

There seemed no point in continuing the discussion. He was almost certain he would get nothing nearer the truth from Bryan. In fact, Bryan wouldn't be talking to him at all but for Susan's insistence.

They went back to the restaurant. The dinner was excellent and if it was a sample of what future diners would receive success was assured. Only, Jerome noticed, Lucas Mathewson hardly touched his food. He looked unwell—literally sick at heart. Jerome had good reason not to care one way or the other about Lucas Mathewson's wellbeing, yet nevertheless he inquired after it.

"Oh, I'm all right. I've been working hard, you know—got to get the spraying finished before the pink-bud stage is past and this sudden spurt of warm weather is no help to me."

"You don't think perhaps you're sickening for something?" urged Jerome. "I don't want to sound alarmist, but you look as if you're on the verge of jaundice."

"Oh, you mean this yellow tinge? It's the sulphur wash

I'm using. Does it look terribly bad, Aylwin? I was going to drop by and see Barbara after this wing-ding is over."

He left as soon as he could, but came back within the hour, while the other guests were still lingering over their coffee and liqueurs. He sat down heavily beside Jerome.

"She's out. At the theatre with her old man and some friends."

Probably the disappointment was the finishing stroke. He really looked in a bad way, and began urging his brother to leave. It appeared they had come up together from Beckenton in Bryan's old Austin. Bryan resisted all his brother's urging in a way that seemed almost callous—until it dawned on Jerome that Bryan didn't want to leave until he'd seen Jerome off the premises. Jerome had no great desire to stay in any case. He went to his hostess, took his leave, and departed.

He hadn't expected to leave so early. He hadn't expected the evening to be like this at all. Somehow he'd got the impression, from her invitation on the phone, that it would be cosier. . . . And to find the Mathewsons here—that was the last straw.

As he walked away he was smitten by an intense desire to know more about her relationship with these two. And here was his chance. When people arrive and leave, they exchange—well—cordialities. All he need do was stop here, at the corner.

But that would be spying. . . . Well, why not? The Mathewsons had extended no particular courtesy to him. . . . But it would be spying on Susan too. But for her own good—yes, for her good, because if the Mathewsons had a hold of any kind over her, the sooner something was done about it the better.

So he took a post in front of a vending machine so that anyone noticing him would think he was buying cigarettes. And he waited.

In about ten minutes Bryan came out alone. This was soon explained when he came back with the car, which had been parked in the next turning. He pulled up. Then he went back into the restaurant. Presently all three came out together—Susan, Bryan and Lucas. In the light of the restaurant doorway Lucas still appeared tired and disconsolate. He came straight out, got into the car, and slumped there.

But Bryan turned in the doorway. He took Susan in his arms and kissed her with fierce possessiveness.

She stood there, humble as a servant girl, and submitted to it. She, who had said in a tone of contempt, "Certainly *not* Bryan Mathewson."

SIXTEEN

IT could only mean that there was substance in Bryan's claim that she owed him something. And it was not a small thing. Women like Susan Denver didn't allow themselves to be mauled by men whom they had formerly only tolerated, without good reason.

A glorious April night. Jerome looked up at the last-quarter moon and decided that a good long walk was what he needed. He ought to go back to the very beginning of this chain of events, and re-examine them—this time with the Mathewsons well to the fore.

About midnight he had a cup of coffee at a cabman's shelter, and about one-thirty he stopped to lean over the parapet at Westminster Bridge to watch the brown-black waters of the Thames slip by. Although he was by no means perfectly happy, he wasn't thinking of throwing himself in. He was thinking about a current of air which, like the current of the river, would support a man-made machine.

The more he thought of it, the sadder became his long, pensive face. At length he turned and went home. He had decided that he was almost sure of the course of events on the day Richard Denver died. He only needed to find out the answers to two questions, and in his own mind he would be certain of the truth. Whether it could be proved was a different matter. And whether he himself wanted to be certain was also doubtful. Sometimes it is better not to be certain.

He was so quiet and pre-occupied that by Friday his business partner grew really worried.

"You in love, or something?" he roared. "You don't look at what you eat, you don't speak a word unless you're

spoken to, and you look at the customers as if they weren't there!"

Jerome busied himself tidying the display of the month's "interest books". "William Wordsworth born 1770—Critical Appreciations. Collected Works." "St. George's Day, Shakespeare's Birthday, April 23rd—Large Selection of Shakespeariana available."

"I think 'Shakespeariana' is a terrible word," he muttered.

"Pay attention when I talk to you. What's the matter with you? If you've got troubles why don't you get to grips with them, instead of wandering around looking like a bull moose with the colic!"

"I haven't got troubles. Other people have, though."

"What other people? Hey, it isn't either of those two nice little pieces in black that you're moping over, is it?"

"I wish you'd get over this juvenile tendency of—"

"And I wish you'd cheer up. You're about as much fun as a church steeple. Honestly, Jerome, are either of these girls worth losing any sleep over?"

"It's not *them* I'm losing sleep over. The person who occupies my thoughts, mainly, is male, unprepossessing, and no friend of mine."

"Then what's your problem?"

"The problem is this, Joe. I know several people who are in a bit of trouble. And one of them may conceivably be in danger."

"Danger of what?"

"Danger of dying."

"Eh?" said Joe, staggered. "How do you mean, 'dying'? What a damn fool thing to say."

"It isn't. A man already has died. As the result of an 'accident.' What's bothering me is, will it happen again?"

Joe was no fool. He sat looking across the office desk at Jerome and the tendency to make fun of his partner died

in him. He said at length, "Oughtn't you to go to the police?"

"I've no proof."

"Can you get proof?"

"I don't know. I could perhaps get additional information, but whether it would prove anything is a different affair."

"Well, it's your onion and your tears, chum. But if it were me, I'd finish peeling it and dry my eycs."

This gnomic advice had its effect. On Saturday Jerome hired a car and went for a trip out into the country. When he was in the vicinity of the gliding club he glanced up into the skies from time to time—a thing he would never have thought of doing a little over a week ago. Now and again he would see a long-winged shape circling lazily overhead. How strange, how unbelievable that one of those had meant death to its pilot. . . .

Alan Osbertson was pleased to see him. He got up from his chair in the F.I.O. and came to the door. "Ah, so we didn't frighten you off with our wild ways after all? I thought last weekend had put paid to your desire to fly a glider."

"Not entirely. I should like to make a flight now, Alan, if you can arrange it."

"Now?" Alan said, a little taken aback. "I'm afraid that's not possible. There's a long list waiting for the two-seater."

Jerome shook his head. "I would like you to take me up for a flight. I'd like to go as soon as possible. I have other business to attend to today and I want to get the preliminaries over first."

"But, honestly, Jerome—"

"This isn't a joy-ride I'm asking for, Alan. Quite the reverse." He took a moment before going on. "I can't explain just at present. But this is important—I want you

to take me up in the two-seater and I want you to do exactly as I say, short of actually risking the machine or our lives."

Alan backed away, misgiving in his eyes. "Is it about—about—?"

"Never mind what it's about. Just do as I ask."

The other man nodded and came out of the hut. He led the way round the field at a steady, plodding pace. When he got to the launching point he took the duty flying instructor aside and held a consultation. Then he came back and said to Jerome shortly, "Okay, it's fixed, but we're not popular."

A chorus of groans and ironic cries of "Favouritism!" greeted the announcement that Alan needed the two-seater for a short flight. But the pupils stood aside obediently enough when the glider had touched down and been pushed back to the launching point.

Jerome and Alan got in. The launch was exactly the same as on previous occasions. They climbed steeply, the runner at the wing was left behind and below them.

"What now?" said Alan.

"Nothing."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Alan looked at Jerome as if he were mad. Jerome leaned over the side to watch the blue shape of the winch come directly below. Here it was. Nearly under them. Directly under them. Behind them.

The cable was suddenly visible below Jerome, snaking down to the grass. And no-one in the glider had done a thing.

"I ought to put her nose down," Alan said anxiously. "After a launch the nose is at the wrong angle."

"What will happen if you don't?"

"We'll lose speed, and in a moment we'll stall."

"I thought so. Don't touch a thing, please, Alan."

The glider flew on, the breeze making its singing sound over the fabric. The slope of the ridge came towards them.

"When we strike the up-current of the ridge," Alan urged, "the nose will go up even further and we'll stall for sure."

"I imagine so. Then we'll spin, shall we?"

"Not necessarily. It depends on the trim of the glider. But it's qui'-ly likely. I wish you'd let me tidy up our angle of attack, Jerome. I don't like this sluggish movement."

"Please don't do anything unless it's actually necessary to prevent a crash."

Suddenly the nose of the glider jerked up. The bubble in the variometer quivered and mounted. There was a shudder, the machine slipped sideways, one wing tipped, and they described a little more than half of a circle. Then the glider righted itself, but it was falling rapidly now.

"How close to the earth do you want to get before I stop her?" Alan asked in bewilderment.

"There's nothing else that will happen if you leave her alone?"

"Nothing, except that we'll go on falling like a stone."

"Okay then." Jerome shivered. "I'm ready to go back to the field if you are."

Without a word Alan brought the glider into level flight. He found a thermal just over Farmer Clifford's sun-warmed roof and climbed a little in that, then with the height thus gained flew home to the landing ground. Within ten minutes Jerome was walking back to the car with Alan, still puzzled, at his side.

"But what was that all about?" he demanded.

"I was just testing out a theory. I'd be obliged if you wouldn't mention this to anybody, Alan."

"All right, if you say so. But that was the weirdest flight I ever made."

In the busy little market town of Beckenton Jerome consulted the files of the local newspaper. Then he consulted the directory in the local library and copied out an address. At this address he presented himself after a quick lunch in a crowded pub.

"Doctor's still out on his rounds," said the young lady in a white overall who opened to his ring.

"Would you mind if I came in and waited till he returned?"

"He doesn't see patients in the afternoon. Next surgery is at six this evening."

"But I'm not a patient. I've come about one of Dr. Slaherne's police cases."

"Oh, a policeman—why didn't you say so?" She stood back and waved him in. "He may be quite a while. Take a seat, will you?"

She disappeared with a rustle of nylon overall and Jerome amused himself by walking nervously back and forth in the slippery polished hall. A little after two he heard a car draw up, and then a key was inserted in the lock. An elderly man carrying a leather case came in.

"Hello," he said, raising his eyebrows. "Who are you?"

"My name's Aylwin, Jerome Aylwin. I'm not a patient —"

The girl appeared from down the hall. "Oh, there you are, doctor. I see the policeman's already introduced himself. There's a phone call about Mrs. Meddows, and the dispenser at Cabbot's can't read the prescription for the Fields baby." She went on to give other items of information. The doctor listened and nodded, waving Jerome into his surgery as he did so.

When they were alone together Jerome said hastily,

"First of all I must clear up a misunderstanding. I am not a policeman."

"But Maisie said—"

"I told her I had come about one of your police cases and she jumped to the conclusion I was a police officer."

"What the devil is this?" Dr. Slaherne said, taking off his glasses and frowning. "Are you a reporter? You ought to know better, you young idiot. I'll give your editor a piece of my mind—"

"I'm not a reporter either. I've no professional connection of any kind with the case I want to ask you about. It's simply that a friend of mine was dissatisfied with the verdict and asked me to make inquiries."

"Verdict? What verdict?"

"The verdict of accidental death on Richard Denver, who died in a glider crash five weeks ago today."

"Who did you say you were?" asked the doctor.

Jérôme gave his name and address while the doctor put on his glasses again and frowned even harder.

"And what, if I may ask, was supposed to be wrong with the verdict at the inquest?"

"This friend who came to me about it—she said she thought perhaps something had been done to the glider to make it crash."

"Nothing of that sort was mentioned at the inquest."

"You gave evidence to the effect that he died of a depressed fracture of the skull?"

"That was in the newspaper report. Yes, I gave that evidence."

"The newspaper report consists of only a few lines. Could you tell me what else you said in evidence?"

"Not much more. I couldn't recall without looking up my records. . . ."

"Would you be prepared to do that?"

"Not unless I know what use you intend to make of the information."

"I'm simply trying to find out the truth. Unfortunately I've arrived on the scene rather late. People have given me rather muddled versions of the medical evidence but the gist seems to be that there was nothing physically wrong with Denver which could account for the crash. I believe you reported on the dead man as having been in excellent health."

"Did I?" said the doctor, refusing to be drawn.

"Well, did you? And was he free from the effects of drugs such as narcotics? And what other injuries had he sustained in the crash, and which of them before death and which after?"

"I couldn't possibly discuss anything of that sort without consulting the authorities. Why don't you go to them, if you're perturbed?"

"Because I've no evidence."

"Of what?"

"Foul play."

"I'm sorry," said Dr. Slaherne, rising. "As far as I'm concerned the case is closed and even if it were not, I'm unable to discuss such matters."

"You couldn't make an exception?"

"Certainly not. And now if you'll excuse me, I've other matters to attend to."

Frustrated, Jerome made his own way out. As he drove back to London he had the rest of Saturday and the whole of Sunday before him in which to feel he was at a dead end.

But on Sunday afternoon about four o'clock his telephone rang. He put down his book and picked up the receiver. "Jerome Aylwin here."

"Mr. Aylwin? This is Beckenton Police Station here. Mr. Aylwin, Dr. Slaherne has informed us of some comments—"

"Oh, Lord," Jerome said to himself. "Now we're in for it."

"—And we would like to discuss the matter further with you," ended the heavy voice on the other end of the line.

"Discuss it?"

"We feel it can't just be left, sir."

"I see. What do you want me to do, then?"

"Would it be convenient at all for you to come and see us, sir? Here at Beckenton?"

"When?"

"Any time you like to suggest, sir."

No time like the present, thought Jerome. Aloud he said, "I could drive down now if that would suit you."

"That would be excellent. Would you ask for Inspector Doulton of Beckenton C.I.D., please? This is his sergeant, Sergeant Wandell, speaking."

"Righto, sergeant. See you in about an hour."

The police station proved to be a Victorian building of curlicued red brick. The sergeant in uniform at the desk handed him over to a constable, who conducted him along several corridors until, outside an oak-grained door, he was delivered over to Sergeant Wandell. Sergeant Wandell was young, beefy, and cheerful. He ushered him into the room where not only Inspector Doulton but also Dr. Slaherne were sitting.

"Sit down, Mr. Aylwin. Would you care for a cup of tea? Cigarette? No? Sure?"

"All I want," Jerome said quietly, "is to get this over."

"Quite, quite," soothed the inspector. He too was a beefy man but unlike his sergeant his manner tended towards the reserved. "First I think I'd better explain how we came to get into touch with you. Dr. Slaherne here told us you had visited him with a request for information. He was not prepared to say anything without

first consulting us, but he was sufficiently perturbed by your visit to think it ought to be reported. I must admit that to me your name meant nothing at first. But Wandell here, who's a bit of a news hound, thought he'd heard of you and looked you up. Then of course I recalled to mind the very excellent evidence you had supplied in the case for the prosecution in the Westerhalton affair."

"I see. So you're prepared to accept that I'm not just trying to be a nuisance to the authorities?"

"Indeed, we've every reason to expect the contrary. We've been in touch with Inspector Chilton in the north, and he spoke very highly of your good sense. Now, sir, what exactly is this suspicion you have over Mr. Richard Denver's death?"

"First may I ask Dr. Slaherne a question?"

The Inspector nodded assent. Dr. Slaherne looked alert.

"Don't be offended, doctor, at the way this is put. I want to know if you took any special care over the post-mortem?"

The doctor grinned briefly. "I always take care, but I know what you mean. As a matter of fact, I carried out the post-mortem on Richard Denver with a great deal of interest. The inspector had been told by so many people that the accident was almost incredible. It seemed up to me to supply a cause. I half expected to find medical evidence of a black-out, or a heart attack, or something of that sort. But he was one of the healthiest corpses I've ever dealt with." This last with a sort of gruesome satisfaction.

"Did you look for evidence of drugs--barbiturates, anything like that?"

"There were no physical changes to indicate any large dose of drugs. The contents of the stomach showed no recent dose."

"Thank you. You see, Inspector, gradually, I came to

the conclusion that there were three possibilities—lack of skill on the part of the pilot due to ill-health or drugs; damage to the machine so as to make it liable to crash; or suicide. Dr. Slaherne's examination seems to rule out the first. I'm able to assure you that the machine was in perfect order. And I'm nearly sure that Denver wasn't the sort of man to commit suicide."

"Then that brings us back to the inquest verdict," said the inspector with relief. "Accidental Death."

"I don't think so. Dr. Slaherne, what were the dead man's injuries?"

The doctor put his fingertips together. "Deceased was a well-nourished man aged about thirty. By the time I first saw him I estimated him to have been dead a little over an hour. He had a head^{injury} consisting of a depressed fracture extending from above and behind the left ear across the skull and slightly downwards to the base. After the autopsy I was able to state that this had caused death. There were also a fractured tibia and four broken ribs as well as a great many bruises and cuts and contusions." He nodded to himself. "I gave it a good deal of my time. As I told you, I wanted to make sure he wasn't dopey from taking some kind of medicine, so I also did a Stas-Otto. The results were negative."

"Of the injuries, which were received before death and which after?"

"The fracture of the skull before death. The others almost simultaneously, I should say."

"How much leeway do you allow when you use the words 'almost simultaneously'?"

The doctor looked at the inspector and the inspector looked at the doctor.

"Very soon after," said Slaherne. "Within about five minutes at the outside, if that."

"Ah."

“Meaning what, Mr. Aylwin?”

“This is going to sound crazy. You need to know a bit about gliding to see that it’s perfectly possible.”

“What?”

“I believe Richard Denver was dead before ever he was launched.”

SEVENTEEN

THE inspector made a sound that might have been a snort of indignation or a muffled laugh. "Come come, sir. I took statements from a great many people. They all say they saw Mr. Denver walk across the field to the launching point. Are you telling me they were watching a dead man?"

"No, he was alive and well at that time. He had a quarrel with Mr. Haskell—"

"I'm aware of that. I spoke to Mr. Haskell too."

"Then Mr. Haskell left the launching point and began to walk round the verge of the field back towards the club house. It seems to me that no other view of the subsequent facts can be taken. Denver was then struck on the head with something of the requisite shape to cause the fracture—what would it be, doctor?"

"We-ell—a short bar of metal—a spanner—a file—even a poker or something of that kind. I took it that his injury had been caused by impact with the back rim of the seat during the crash. There was a great deal of blood on the rim of the seat and the back edge of the cockpit."

"But if the corpse had been jolted about after death, the blood would still be distributed in much the same way?"

"Indeed yes."

"But wait a minute, Mr. Aylwin," objected the inspector. "If the pilot was dead, who was flying the glider?"

"No-one." Jerome smiled ruefully. "A glider will fly itself if left alone. The number of times I was told that! And still I didn't take it in—and neither did any of the people who told me, so perhaps I'm not so dim after all."

"Fly itself? Surely not. After all, it might stay in the air a while—I grant you that, the air currents would take it along, I suppose. But the launch? As I understand it, the glider is pulled up into the air by means of a cable at the far end of the field. Before the glider can fly off, the pilot would have to detach the glider from the cable."

"No."

"No?"

"It happens automatically if the pilot should by some oversight fail to pull the release knob."

"What?" exclaimed the inspector. "Nobody told me that!"

Jerome shook his head. "No. It's like the glider flying itself—gliding enthusiasts know these things and they take it for granted everybody else does. I found it out almost by accident. A student pilot went up for his first solo while I was out at the club and he was so intent on keeping his aircraft level he forgot to release the cable. He got to a point in the air above the winch where he would have dragged the cable backwards. At that point, the automatic release worked. The man I was standing beside took it entirely for granted. Yesterday I went for a flight with that same man and we let the glider fly itself. As we passed overhead of the winch the cable automatically dropped away. We flew on for some distance before lack of controls made any difference to the glider's performance. Then we got into some difficulties and had to pull out of a dive. Denver, being dead, couldn't do that. So he crashed, and his head injury was accepted as having been caused by the crash."

Inspector Doulton picked up a pencil and began to make notes on a pad. "You say that Denver was perfectly all right after the quarrel with Haskell. Then he got into his aircraft in the normal way?"

"Yes, and carried out the usual check of the controls and so on. One of those helping with the launch hitched on his launching cable under the glider's nose and then trotted off about twenty yards to pick up the signal bat. This signal bat is used to relay launching instructions to the winch-driver. The other helper held the wing and relayed the pilot's commands. Only, in this instance, the pilot actually gave no commands after the cable was hooked on. He was dead by that time."

"He was struck on the head while the other helper went off to pick up the signal bat?"

"Yes."

"By the helper who remained near the glider, to hold the wing at the take-off?"

"Yes."

"But Mr. Aylwin, as I recall the account I was given, those two helpers were a young man called Swinefold and Mrs. Susan Denver."

"Yes."

"Which of the two used the signal bat?"

"Piglet—Percy Swinefold."

"And Mrs. Denver remained by the glider."

"Yes."

"Are you saying that Mrs. Denver murdered her husband?"

"Yes."

There was a silence while Doulton studied what he had written down. Then he looked up and said curtly, "Any proof?"

"Not a shred. And I don't think you'll get any. I only feel sure that it happened this way because it's the only way I can account for subsequent events."

"Which were?"

"May I tell it my own way? Thank you. We'll go back to where I first got involved in this business. Miss Barbara

Haskell came to me with the theory that the glider had been sabotaged. She favoured a man called Leonard Catt as the criminal. Pussy—Mr. Catt—is very much in love with Mrs. Denver and when I first met him he was at her new restaurant in Brandywine Place, off Baker Street. I said nothing about having previously talked to Barbara and struck up an acquaintance with Pussy. He asked if I'd like to go gliding and offered to take me to Mollin Ridge the following Saturday. It was only after it was all arranged that I introduced myself. One of them—I didn't know which—gasped at mention of my name."

"One of them had read the papers, then."

"Presumably. Next day they came together to my bookshop. They wanted to prepare me for the gossip I should hear about Denver's death and, if possible, Mrs. Denver wanted to dissuade me from going. When I said I still intended to go, Mrs. Denver came back to the bookshop alone to beg me not to listen to the stories against Pussy Catt. She said a great many people suspected him of having been responsible for her husband's death. This wasn't borne out by the facts. The only person I ever heard name Pussy was Barbara Haskell. I believe Mrs. Denver wished to direct my attention to Pussy and to the sabotage theory, which she knew to be without foundation."

"You're kind of hard on Mrs. Denver," Dr. Slaherne put in. "Sure you haven't a grudge against her?"

Jerome cleared his throat. "Quite the reverse. I was so biased in her favour that it wasn't until events forced me to consider her that I began to see she was the most likely suspect. The first thing that alerted me was a mystery about a telephone call made by a man called Lucas Mathewson. You know him?" he added in aside to the inspector.

"He's the brother that keeps the fruit farm, isn't he?"

I've known everybody you've named so far. If anybody new crops up, I'll stop you."

"Righto. Lucas told us that Susan—Mrs. Denver—was coming down to Mollin for the week-end. He said he'd been in *The Silent Woman* when she phoned to reserve the room. But the receptionist there mentioned to me that Lucas had reserved the room. I don't know why I checked up on it. . . . Anyhow, it turned out that Mrs. Denver had *not* phoned the inn. Lucas had phoned Mrs. Denver, and then I suppose in response to instructions from her, reserved the room for her."

"That seems harmless enough, though," objected Doulton.

"I suppose so. But why should he phone Susan? And why, in answer to his phone call, should Susan decide to come to Mollin when previously she'd assured Pussy she wouldn't be coming? I imagine the reason was something like this—Lucas rang her and said, 'Look here, there's a bloke here asking awkward questions' and she said, 'Right, I'll come and divert his attention.' Or perhaps Lucas said, 'You know that chap you said I was to keep an eye on? He's being troublesome.' But her reply would be much the same. I don't think Lucas knew about me beforehand though. He played an extremely clever practical joke on me which could only make me think twice about him. If he'd known I was interested in Denver's death I don't think he would have done it."

"So Mrs. Denver came down to the gliding club?"

"She did." Jerome coloured. "You've met her. She's a very attractive woman."

"I see what you mean by 'diverting his attention,'" the doctor said drily.

"Unfortunately for Susan, she did it a bit too thoroughly, and aroused the jealousy of the other Mathewson brother."

"Bryan? Now, he's the cabinet-maker, isn't he."

"That's right. He seethed with anger all Saturday evening, and on Sunday morning when he happened upon us together outside The Silent Woman he made a bit of a scene. He told her he had a 'right' to reproach her for—well, for flirting, I suppose you'd call it. She was genuinely surprised and asked what he meant. And he replied—this is verbatim—"Think! Think hard! And then you'll realize what you owe me, what I've done for you!"

"Really," murmured Doulton. "And what had he done for her, do you suppose?"

"I think he had helped conceal the murder weapon. I'll tell you what I think happened. Denver, alive and well, got into his glider. Susan was standing by the cockpit, waiting to fit on the perspex hood. She was wearing a duffel coat with patch pockets, according to the description given by Vivian Haskell. I think she snatched off her husband's knitted cap, hit him hard with some short metal bar she had brought in her pocket and then, wrapping it in his cap so that her coat shouldn't be stained, put the whole thing in her pocket again. Walking back round the field she was joined by Haskell. She wanted to get rid of the weapon before the blood seeped through the wool of the cap, so the best thing to do was to open the door of her car and drop the cap, still with the weapon inside, on the seat or perhaps push it carelessly into the glove compartment."

"You're giving her credit for a lot of nerve?"

"I think she's got a lot of nerve. She hasn't got in a panic once, although her plans nearly came unstuck once or twice. I suppose she meant to hide the cap and the weapon effectively later on, but the news of Denver's crash was phoned through almost at once. Bryan Mathewson, anxious to be helpful, rushed out to turn her car for her. He didn't pay any attention to her protests on this

point. What I believe is that he saw the cap, perhaps picked it up intending to put it out of sight for fear it should distress her—oh, I don't know for sure. Anyhow, he saw the weapon, with the blood on it. Without really stopping to consider what he was doing, he put it well out of sight. He made himself accessory after the fact—the fact being a murder, as he suddenly realized when Denver's dead body was carried past him not long after."

"I suppose it's possible. . . ."

"Barbara Haskell says that when he saw the body going past he said 'My God, he's *dead*!' as if it had hit him like a thunderbolt. And she said he looked guilty. Oh, I know, how someone looked at a given moment is hardly enough to pin a murder charge on anybody. I told you there was no proof, and I don't believe you'll get any even if you believe my story. But the fact remains that Susan Denver, who regarded Bryan as a rather comical little man, has had to knuckle under to him. He has some hold over her. I believe it's the knowledge that she had a bloodstained weapon in her car that Saturday. Incidentally, she's traded in that car for a new one."

"But you say she was surprised when he spoke of this to her?"

"She was. I daresay that, since he hadn't spoken before, she thought she must have pushed the cap and its contents farther out of sight than she remembered. Then when he gave her this broad hint, she realized that after all he'd seen it. From that moment she set herself to smooth him down. And she succeeded."

"Yes, but wait a minute, where does Lucas Mathewson come in? You say it was *Lucas* who phoned her?"

"I can't be sure of his exact status in the affair. One thing is certain—Susan couldn't have carried out her plan to dispose of Denver if there had been the usual group of 'helpers' at the launch. Lucas was performing card

tricks in the club lounge to keep everybody occupied, so that only two people went out to the launching point."

"Three including Mr. Haskell."

"He was an unexpected development, but she was able to persuade him to move off towards the club house. It's some distance round that field, you know. And from a quarter of a mile off it would be impossible to see what she was doing. Haskell said he thought she was talking to her husband. Piglet, the signal man, would have been busy moving off towards the place where the bat was lying, and then picking it up and looking towards the winch."

"So really," said the inspector slowly, "if the way you've reconstructed it has any truth in it, the only person who can help us is Bryan Mathewson."

"He won't split on her. He's devoted to her."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. He might let something slip if we just questioned him often enough."

"So he might. But not the first tine of questioning. And before you can repeat the inquisition, Susan will marry him. And a husband cannot be made to give evidence against his wife, I believe."

"Well then," Doulton said stubbornly, "we'll make a search for the weapon."

"You can if you like. That weapon, and the cap with the bloodstains rubbed into it, will have been burned or sunk in the Thames or—or—" Jerome shrugged. "You won't find it."

"We can at least try. And we can apply for an exhumation order so as to see if the interval of time between the skull fracture and the other injuries bears out your theory."

"I doubt if you'll get anything that way," Dr. Slaherne said, shaking his head.

"It's worth a try. If she gets alarmed, something may

happen. That's if the whole thing isn't your imagination, Aylwin!"

"She may be alarmed, but she won't do anything foolish. Barbara Haskell said to me that Susan Denver was 'well-organized,' and that about sums it up. I've thought about it a lot," Jerome said wearily, "and I don't think there's anything she's forgotten."

"She must have made a mistake somewhere," insisted Doulton.

"Her only weakness is that she enjoys the pleasant things of life--she couldn't resist buying an expensive model dress with the money at her disposal now that her foolish husband isn't throwing it all down the drain. That, in my opinion, was her motive. She was tired of seeing Denver mismanage their affairs, tired of living from hand to mouth when with a little business sense they could be comfortably off. Now he's dead she'll make money from various ventures--her new restaurant, the design for a new glider. She may even have received a fair sum from her husband's insurance. But none of those things is evidence of a crime. There really isn't any evidence, inspector."

"What you're saying" Doulton replied morosely, "is that she's committed the perfect murder."

EIGHTEEN

THE unseasonably warm April continued on its way. Budget Day came, bringing the usual groans from the populace. Girls disregarded the calendar and put on their summer dresses. The Charing Cross Road was an airless canyon filled with ill-tempered traffic, the bookshop was stuffy and smelt of dust, and Jerome wished he was in the Antarctic. Inspector Doulton, unexpectedly natty in a lightweight tropical suit, looked disapproving.

"What you want through here is a good country breeze to clear away all this heaviness!"

"But you didn't come here to discuss the climate," Jerome guessed. "You'd better come upstairs to my flat, hadn't you?"

"It would be preferable, yes."

Once there he refused, to Jerome's regret, any refreshment except iced coffee. They sat down opposite each other. Jerome felt iced coffee was not enough moral support for what he might hear.

"Well?" he inquired.

"Nothing. Mrs. Denver protested at the idea of exhumation at first but climbed down when she saw we were determined. The pathologist is no help to us, though. He says the skull fracture definitely occurred at the time of death, but how long afterwards Denver received the other injuries is impossible to state. If the time interval had been longer, it might have been possible; but the crash coming so soon after the blow to the head, they just can't tell us anything that would stand up in a court of law."

"How about the weapon?"

"We asked if we could look around her flat. Incid-

ently, you said she couldn't resist nice things—she's got a wardrobe full of new clothes and says she gave away her old ones, including her duffel coat, to a rag and bone man. We haven't been able to find him."

"If and when you do, it won't do you any good. There will be no blood on that duffel coat."

"And there was no weapon in the flat. Nor a knitted cap. I asked her if I could see her husband's clothes, hoping to get in a question about the knitted cap, but they've all gone to the rag and bone man too."

"Did you question Bryan?"

"I did. Innocent as a newborn babe. He produced some yarn about having lent money to Denver when I asked what he meant about Mrs. Denver owing him a lot."

"Yes, he handed me that one too. Mrs. Denver arranged an interview on purpose for him to tell me that tale. I had said to her that I wouldn't be satisfied until I heard his explanation of that and another point."

"What other point?" Doulton said hopefully. "Something concrete?"

"Only a personal thing. He had thrown a carving in among some coals and I got a bit damaged. I think Susan wondered if I'd got on to something about the murder, and arranged that meeting to see what I would say. I know Bryan was downright relieved when it turned out only to be about getting my face burnt."

"He doesn't seem worried when we question him. In fact, I think he rather enjoys it."

"Yes," Jerome agreed thoughtfully, "that could happen. He feels he's protecting the woman he loves, and who loves him. I expect by this time he's got excellent reason to believe that Susan loves him, 'really and truly'."

"I expect you're right, Mr. Aylwin. But what worries me is, how long before she gets fed up with him? He's a bit of a drip, if you'll excuse the expression, and she's a remarkably

beautiful girl. If you're right, she's already got rid of one husband who was a handicap to her. How long before she does the same for Bryan Mathewson?"

"No, no," protested Jerome. "She wouldn't do a thing like that twice."

"Why not?"

"Well, damn it—"

"If she bided her time and then arranged another 'accident,' she might get away with it. And with good luck, no love-sick little man would barge in and complicate matters."

"Poor devil! I wonder if he's aware of the danger he may be in? It would have been far better for him if he hadn't got involved. And by the way, what about the other brother? Did she ask him to keep the club members occupied with his card tricks?"

"He says not. He just looked bewildered and fed up all the time I was talking to him so in the end I gave it up. But here's what I wanted to say to you, Aylwin. You can keep in touch with these people in a natural manner whereas they go on guard when a policeman comes near. If you keep your ears open—"

"They're not likely to say much when I'm around," Jerome muttered. "They must know it's because of me that the police have been getting inquisitive."

"Yes, but excuse me—I was thinking more about Mr. Lucas Mathewson, actually. He seems—well, he seems inclined to be jealous of you."

"I thought we'd cleared all that up." Jerome sighed. "How does it help, anyhow?"

"I just thought if you continued to see Miss Haskell, Lucas Mathewson might continue to feel jealous. And you might be able to goad him into saying something."

"No, thanks. I don't fancy that assignment. Besides, I don't think Lucas *knows* anything."

"Be that as it may, he fetched Mrs. Denver down to Mollin when you appeared on the scene asking questions. He may not *know* anything, but he may suspect a lot. And he may talk if you just keep on at him."

"I don't think so."

"Then how about asking the young lady to question him? He seems very gone on her."

"Barbara?" Jerome shook his head. "She wouldn't do it."

"She might if you asked her. We do need more to go on. . . ."

He protested that he didn't like the idea, and argued for quite a while. But seven o'clock that evening saw him ringing the bell of the Haskell's flat.

The housekeeper was saying doubtfully, "Miss Haskell and her father are just about to go out—" when Barbara herself erupted from the drawing room.

"Jerome! I thought it was your voice! Oh, how like you to come!"

"Why, what's the matter?"

"It's so dreadful! Poor Lucas! I never really liked him, of course, but to think of him like that—dying—!"

"Dying?" cried Jerome. "Lucas?"

"You mean you didn't know? But I thought that was why you had come--to go down to Beckenton with us."

"I didn't know a thing. Tell me—quick—what's happened?" He almost shook her in his urgency.

"Happened? Nothing. He's very ill, that's all. Jerome, what's the matter with you?"

"For God's sake, girl, answer my question! What's wrong with him? What kind of illness?"

"It's just that he's in hospital with heat-stroke—"

"Heat-stroke?"

"Jerome, do sit down. You look like death yourself. Whatever's the matter?"

He rubbed his eyes with boney knuckles and told himself he'd never been more of a fool in his life. All that fantastic panic just because Lucas Mathewson was ill —my God, people got ill and died every day of the year.

"When was Lucas taken ill?" he asked, forcing himself to speak normally.

"He collapsed while he was working in the orchard this morning. This unseasonable heat, you know. They rushed him off to hospital but he's in a very bad way. They don't expect him to last the night. He's been asking for me. Daddy was dressing when the news came, and as soon as he's ready he's going to drive me down to Beckenton. I don't feel up to driving myself after news like this."

Yes, Lucas had said the heat didn't agree with him. And he'd been overworked and not very well for some times. There was no need to go farther than that for an explanation.

When Haskell came in it was taken for granted that Jerome would go with them in their car. Barbara spent the journey reproaching herself for not being nice to Lucas in days gone by and making childish bargains with God about being nice to him in future if only he were allowed to survive.

At Beckenton General Hospital the receptionist directed them to a waiting room. Jerome felt as if he'd had a kick in the stomach when he went in and found himself face to face with Susan Denver.

She was there, it appeared, because Bryan was there. Bryan sat looking white and drawn, hanging on tight to Susan's hand.

"He won't really die, you know," he assured them all. "They can do such marvels these days for really serious diseases. And after all, sunstroke's not a disease."

Of them all, the two women were the most calm. Susan was soothing and comforting. Barbara, although she was

shaken to the core, kept herself in good control. Bryan was pathetic, almost childish, in his grief, Haskell was uncomfortable in a hospital atmosphere, and Jerome couldn't find a word to say.

A sister with a marvellously convoluted cap appeared and said, "Miss Haskell?"

"Yes, I'm here."

"If you'll come with me, please."

Barbara rose bravely enough. But as she passed her father and Jerome on her way to the door she cast them an anguished glance. Haskell shivered and turned away. Jerome felt that the least he could do was go with her to the door of the ward.

"Only one visitor," the sister said decisively. "He's a very sick man."

"I quite understand that." He stood back at the ward door. Barbara went up the long aisle between the beds, going in at last between the screens round a bed near the far end. Jerome stood watching from the doorway. A white-coated physician came round the screens and walked down the ward.

"Sister says you're with Miss Haskell?"

"That's correct."

"She's very upset. I don't want her upsetting my patient. You don't think she'll break down?"

"I—I couldn't actually guarantee that she won't. She lost someone very dear to her only a few weeks ago."

"Dear, dear. Sometimes it goes like that. I'm afraid there's very little hope for Mr. Mathewson. It's a good thing Miss Haskell has someone with her in case the end comes while she's here."

"It's as close as that?" Jerome said in dismay. "It seems so impossible. . . . A man so hale and hearty as Mathewson."

"These chemically induced heat-strokes are the very

devil. Once the syndrome has begun there's almost nothing to be done. The metabolism is fatally altered and—"

"What kind of heat-stroke?"

"Oh, we get a case from time to time in hot weather—somebody spraying with one of the modern weedkillers. You'll think me callous, but really they've no-one but themselves to blame. The government keeps sending out warnings about D.N.O.C. and parathion and yet they still won't take proper precautions."

"Is that what caused Mathewson's illness? Lack of precaution?"

"He appears to have been spraying D.N.O.C. without protective clothing over a period of weeks. Today, the weather being so hot, he had stripped to the waist. I ask you! The stuff gets in through the skin, you know. And accumulates. It's quickly absorbed by the lungs. I bet the poor chap's bronchial tree is stained as yellow as his skin."

Jerome shook his head "I actually asked him, about a fortnight ago, if he was sickening for jaundice. I remember saying it."

"Pity you didn't warn him off D.N.O.C. I suppose he's been spraying with it almost every day, and then today the heat brought on the final collapse."

"But I didn't think he was—" He broke off. Then he took the doctor's white-clad arm in his fingers and muttered, "Just a minute. Don't say anything."

"What's the matter with you?" said Dr. Quires, trying to pull free.

"No, no, hang on. Listen. Did Mathewson actually say to you, 'I've been spraying with D.N.O.C.?'"

"No, of course not. He was unconscious when he was brought in and has been only partially conscious since."

"Then how do you know he's been using D.N.O.C.?"

"Because of the 'yellow sodium stain on the skin.'"

"Couldn't that be caused by lime-and-sulphur wash?"

"Lime-and-sulphur doesn't cause a pulse rate of 88 and a temperature of 102. Besides, there's at least 11 milligrammes of D.N.O.C. by urinalysis."

"Have you asked him if he's been using D.N.O.C.?"

"What the blazes would be the point of that? We *know* he has."

"But does *he*?" countered Jerome.

NINETEEN

JEROME raced down to the hall and plunged into the public call box there. Inspector Doulton was not at the police station but Sergeant Wandell, hearing the urgency in his voice, gave his private number. A woman protested that the inspector was just sitting down to supper but finally agreed to call him. Seconds later came the detective's velvety voice: "Aylwin? It had better be important. I've left a pork chop for this."

"Inspector, I'm at the General Hospital."

"Which General Hospital?"

"Here in Beckenton. Did you know Lucas Mathewson is on the dangerously ill list, not expected to live through the night?"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. *Lucas Mathewson?*"

"I know, I was surprised too. But listen. Remember there were no unnecessary spectators because Lucas was doing card tricks. That could have been planned in advance. Now he's ill, having accumulated a fatal dose of a poisonous spray in his body."

"What spray? What do you mean?"

"It appears he's been spraying his trees with D.N.O.C. for some weeks, without taking the trouble to wear protective clothing."

"Damn fool," growled Doulton. "We've had one or two fatalities like that. He ought to have known better."

"Suppose he thought he was spraying with lime-and-sulphur wash, though?"

"What!" exploded the other. "You mean, there might have been a switch?"

"I just thought—it's possible . . . Lucas keeps all the poisonous chemicals locked up in a shed, but it's easy as pie

to get in and out of the window. I know, I actually got out through the window after he locked me in there for a joke. And he's got a spraying machine that takes a big load of chemicals. Suppose somebody added a good helping of D.N.O.C. to his lime-and-sulphur spray?"

"Would it mix? Some of these things just sink to the bottom."

"His spraying machine has a patent agitator that keeps the chemicals mixed. He invented it himself, poor devil."

"Aylwin, I don't like this. I'm coming straight away. We've got to see if he can tell us which spray he's been using."

"He's been more or less unconscious since they brought him in. I'll speak to the doctor and see if he can rouse him."

He went upstairs again four at a time. The doctor to whom he'd been speaking was nowhere in sight. He grabbed a plump young probationer about to go into the ward with a covered tray and gasped, "That doctor---the one I was speaking to---in charge of Lucas Mathewson---"

"Who's Lucas Mathewson?" she said blankly.

"The heat-stroke case."

"Oh yes—Dr. Quires is dealing with that—he's at the patient's bed at this moment." She indicated the tray she was carrying, as being needed there.

"When you go in, tell the doctor I must speak to him at once. It's extremely urgent. Quick now."

The probationer scurried down the ward, her apron flapping. In a moment Dr. Quires came out from behind the screens to stare at Jerome from a safe distance. Jerome beckoned vehemently. The doctor came to the door, rather slowly and with the severe-looking sister in attendance as reinforcement.

"Doctor—I've been on the phone to Inspector Doulton of the local C.I.D. He's coming round here immediately,

and he wants to ask Lucas Mathewson a very important question."

Dr. Quires's face had gone through every shade of emotion from alarm to complete negation during this speech.

"You won't get any answer to any questions from him, I'm afraid."

"He's not *dead*?"

"No, but he's incapable of answering questions—or even of understanding them. in fact. I've just been trying to get some information from him, in view of what you were just saying to me, but I doubt if he even hears me."

"Is there anything you can do? It's extremely important to find out the truth about the spray he's been using, doctor."

"But why? I don't altogether see why? The sensible thing will be to empty the tank that he was using and fill it with fresh solution—no-one else need be endangered."

Jerome shook his head. "It's less simple and more important than that. Please try to get some response from Lucas, doctor. We've *got* to know."

Dr. Quires moved from one foot to the other, uncertainly. Then he said to the sister, "If you'll wait here and speak to this inspector, sister, I'll see what I can do."

He hurried back to the bed behind the screens. The sister folded her hands in front of her and prepared to wait patiently for the detective. But the wait was very short. Almost at once he came sprinting up the stairs beyond the ward doors. He paused just outside. Jerome and the sister went to join him there.

"Well?"

"Dr. Quires is trying to question the patient for you," Sister said.

"That won't do. I'll have to do the questioning myself, I'm afraid."

She raised her eyes to the ceiling in reproach to heaven at heavy-handed policemen who came interfering in the last moments of dying men. She beckoned to the probationer nurse, hovering in a doorway on the landing. "Go and fetch Dr. MacDaid."

Off scurried the probationer once more. The inspector looked his inquiry. "The Senior Registrar," Sister explained. "In view of the patient's condition, he had better be informed if you insist on questioning him."

"Very well, just as you say." The detective drew Jerome aside while they waited. "I sent Wandell to the fruit farm to have a look around that shed. He's going to send samples to the police lab. for analysis—from the tank of the spraying apparatus and so on."

"You have his keys?" *

"The housekeeper's there. She's got Mathewson's keys—she took home his clothes after they'd put him to bed here. What was that you said about him having accumulated a poisonous dose, Aylwin?"

"I got the impression from the doctor that D.N.O.C. filters in through the skin and the lungs, until at last enough has collected to bring on the fatal syndrome. He said something about the body's metabolism being altered. I confess I don't understand it entirely but the effect seems to take some weeks to develop."

"Say four weeks. And it's five since Denver's crash."

"In other words, if the switch was carried out by the person we suspect, it was done at almost the same time as Denver was disposed of."

"So it looks as if this was another carefully arranged accident, planned from the very outset. She had to have an accomplice or at least a helper, but she didn't want him hanging around afterwards, a danger to her security."

"My God, Doulton," Jerome said with a grey face, "if

he dies without telling us what spray he was using, this will be written off as another accident, brought on by his own carelessness!"

"Even if he tells us. . . . Even if he says 'I was using something harmless,' who's to prove he wasn't under a genuine misapprehension?"

The probationer nurse came back with a tall, distinguished man in a lounge suit. Doulton stepped up to him and said "Dr. MacDaid? My name's Doulton." He showed his warrant card and spoke for a while in low tones. The Senior Registrar leaned over to listen, his face grave. He said to the sister, "Would you let Dr. Quires know I'd like a word with him, sister?"

In a moment they were all involved in serious conference. "He doesn't respond at all, I'm afraid," said Quires. "I don't think he'll regain full consciousness again."

It was then that the sister, for all her severe face, gave proof of deep perceptiveness and understanding. "The patient rallied remarkably while Miss Haskell was by his bed," she ventured. "Perhaps it would help if the young lady were to ask your questions for you, Inspector."

"It might work, at that," Quires agreed.

MacDaid looked round for the patient, hardworking probationer. "Run to the visitors' waitingroom, nurse, and tell Miss Haskell we'd like to speak to her."

When Barbara arrived and had the position explained to her she absolutely refused to take part in the plan.

"You can't do it!" she stormed. "The poor man—he's dying! Can't you leave him in peace?"

"But Miss Haskell, we've got to know the answer to this question—"

"No, I won't do it! You haven't seen him or you wouldn't ask it. He looks so—so—It doesn't matter to him any more what spray he was using, or how it got mixed

up. What does he care? And what do I care! I won't do it—it would be torture!"

Jerome seized her by the elbow and marched her into the nearest doorway, which turned out to be the ward kitchen. He shoved her, not very gently, into a scrubbed chair.

"Listen," he said harshly, "we're not asking you to do this just to make you feel miserable or to torment Lucas. Get it through your head that this is a matter of life and death. Not Lucas's life or death—Lucas is done for. But someone else will be in danger unless we get to the bottom of how Lucas came to make this stupid mistake with dangerous chemicals. You've got to ask these questions for us. He doesn't hear anyone else's voice."

"Who is in danger? What does it all mean?"

"I can't tell you that. I'll tell you this, though. The man you loved was murdered. Denver's death was no accident. The same person arranged this 'accident' for Lucas, we're almost certain. But we need Lucas's evidence."

She stared up at him with haunted eyes. "You—you really mean this?"

"On my sacred word of honour."

"Richie was murdered?"

"Yes."

"And if I ask Lucas these questions, it will help to bring the murderer to justice?"

"Yes."

She rose, steadying herself with one hand on the back of the wooden chair. "Very well," she said in a dead voice.

Lucas Mathewson was still alive. But only just. Dr. Quires and the Registrar looked unwilling as they all took up positions round the bed, the police shorthand writer close at Barbara's elbow so as to hear question and answer. Barbara held on convulsively to Jerome's arm so

that he too was forced to be close to the bed. When he saw the patient in the bed, he understood her abhorrence and dismay.

Only the colouring of the hair and the way it sprang from his forehead recalled the man Jerome had known. Otherwise this was a stranger. Flesh seemed to have fallen away from the facial bones, leaving them stark and prominent. The yellow tint of the skin was very noticeable now. The eyes were closed. It could have been a death mask they were looking at, except for an occasional spasm of the muscles of the mouth. The breathing was very shallow and rapid.

Even Inspector Doulton was dismayed. "He doesn't look able—" He broke off and swallowed. "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to back out, Miss Haskell."

"No, I want to do it. Tell me what to say."

"First you'll have to see if he will respond at all," Dr. Quires said. "Just speak to him in your usual voice, but close to his ear."

She leaned forward in her chair.

"Lucas, wake up. Lucas, dear, it's Barbara back again. Lucas, do you hear what I'm saying?"

They waited, frozen in expectancy. Barbara turned a glance of despair on Jerome. "He doesn't hear."

"Try again, Miss," urged the inspector. "And maybe you'd better get the questions in as quick as you can. If he wakes up, ask what spray he was using. Try to make sure he understands the question."

"Lucas, you must wake up now. I want to talk to you, Lucas. Don't you hear me, my dear?"

The parched lips moved. The eyes flickered. In a whisper he spoke her name. "Barbara?"

"I'm here. I've got some questions to ask you, Lucas. Don't go to sleep again!"

"No. . . ."

"Lucas, the spray you were using on your fruit trees—what was it?"

"Eh?" he said, and even in the cracked whisper his surprise at the question was evident.

"What insecticide were you using?"

"Lime . . . sulphur . . . wash."

"Not D.N.O.C.?" prompted Jerome.

"In April?" Lucas replied. "The books . . . say . . . not D.N.O.C. in April."

"Lucas, the doctors say your illness was brought on by using D.N.O.C. for several weeks without wearing proper protective clothing."

"Rubbish!" he said, and annoyance gave him a spurt of strength.

"Ask when he last used it," prompted Jerome again. Barbara waveringly put the question.

". . . Christmas," was the reply. "Why?"

A policeman came round the screens and beckoned to the inspector. He went to meet him, listened to what he had to say, nodded, and came back to the bed.

"Tell him," he said to Barbara, "that the contents of his spraying apparatus have been analysed and it's half D.N.O.C."

Barbara obeyed. Lucas lay silent. It was difficult to know if he had taken it in.

"Ask if he could have put it in by mistake," Jerome said.

A strange thing happened. Lucas's eyes travelled from Barbara to the man next to her. His lips moved in the very wraith of a smile. ". . . Might have known . . ." he whispered. "Anything queer going on, you'll be there, eh?"

Jerome said, quickly and clearly, "Did you put D.N.O.C. in your spray tank, Lucas?"

"No."

"Could you have done it by mistake?"

"No. Quite different containers."

"Then I think perhaps someone put it there for you, Lucas."

"That stuff's poisonous," Lucas croaked.

"Yes. I think the person who put it there knew that."

"Someone out to get me."

"Who could it be, Lucas?"

A pause. Lucas tried to moisten his lips. "Susan Denver," he said clearly.

Barbara gave a stifled cry of amazement and half rose from her chair. "Susan?"

"Wanted to make sure . . . I didn't live . . . to tell on her." Lucas's hand made clutching movements on the sheet. "By God, I'll take her with me if I go!"

"Could she have got at your chemicals, Lucas?"

"I don't see how. . . . Kept them under lock and key. . . . Never let anybody near that shed. . . . 'cept me—and you, of course, Aylwin!" Once more he tried to smile. "Biter bit, eh?"

"I can't believe it," Barbara moaned. "I can't, I can't! Why should she do it, Lucas?"

Lucas looked at Barbara once more. His face, if anything, went more wasted and weary. "Barbara . . . promise to forgive. . . ."

"Yes—oh yes, Lucas!"

"I knew she meant harm to him . . . to Denver. Didn't know what, though. . . . Said to me, 'Keep them all away from the launch, that's all you have to do.' I said, 'Why should I?' . . . Didn't understand, you see. . . . She said, 'You'll get Barbara all to yourself'. . . . Then I knew. . . . she meant to see him off for good. . . ."

Barbara covered her face with her hands.

"Sorry, Barbara. . . . He was no bloody good, you

know. . . ." His eyes turned to Jerome. "Do you know how she did it, Jerome?"

"I think so."

"More than I do. . . . I've tried to fathom it out. . . . But of course I knew she was responsible. . . . She needn't have done this to me. . . . I'd never have split on her."

His voice had sunk to inaudibility. The Senior Registrar said with authority, "I must bring this to an end now. I won't answer for the consequences if this interview is continued."

Doulton sighed and nodded. They rose and made ready to go. As Jerome was turning away he heard his name whispered. He turned back to the bed. Lucas was staring at him with burning eyes.

Jerome had to bend very close to hear what was said.

"Not saying what I did was right. . . . But I trusted her. . . . All the time, she had set this trap for me. . . . Switched the chemicals maybe even before she asked me to help her. . . . I'd never have given her away if she'd played straight. Get her for this, Aylwin."

"I promise you," said Jerome.

TWENTY

“WELL now,” said Inspector Doulton, wiping his face and blowing out a breath of relief, “what odds do you give on the life of the other brother?”

“I wouldn’t hazard my money. Do you think you’ll be able to nail her for this?”

“My God, I hope so. She must have gone to that shed while Lucas was away—”

“That would be easy enough. On gliding weekends, his housekeeper went to visit her auntie in Bristol and the place was empty. While he was at the airfield—and she would be there with her husband, so she would be sure to see Lucas arrive—she could drive over there, switch the chemicals in the tank, and drive back.”*

“And how do you say she got into the shed?”

“Through the window. It’s a meat ticket. I’ll show you.”

“We have Lucas’s statement that no-one went there except himself. All we need is one fingerprint, one shred of evidence.”

“Unless she managed to steal Lucas’s keys, she must have climbed into the shed. Surely there’ll be *some* evidence!” Jerome said, more to reassure himself than the detective. And added, “Can you arrest her as things stand at present?”

“Not a chance. But we can make sure she’s ‘available’ for questioning. I’ve told Wandell to get in touch with the Metropolitan Police—”

“But she’s here.”

“Who? Where?”

“In the hospital, with Bryan, acting the comforting fiancè.”

"My God, what a turn-up for the book. Come on!"

Pushing Jerome ahead of him to show him the way, he went to the visitors' waiting room. Barbara had just rejoined her father there. Otherwise, it was empty.

"Where's she gone?" barked Doulton.

"Who?" Haskell said, astounded at his tone.

"Mrs. Denver. She was here, wasn't she?"

"Yes, until a little while ago. But then the probationer came in and told my daughter that the police wanted her to put some questions to Lucas—"

"She did what?" groaned Jerome.

"—And a moment later Susan—Mrs. Denver—said she was sure that, after all that, Lucas wouldn't be strong enough to see anyone else tonight. So she and Bryan Mathewson pushed off. The hospital will be sure to call them—"

"But will they come when you do call for them?" muttered Jerome.

"Oh hell," said the inspector, and turning, fled back the way he had come in search of a telephone.

Sister allowed him to use hers. He called the station, telling them that Mrs. Denver had left the hospital some ten minutes earlier and that he wanted her picked up. "I don't know what car she's using," he was saying, when Jerome came back with the news that it was her new Renault.

"Blue and grey, and the number's OXX851, as far as I remember. The hall porter saw them drive off in it."

Doulton repeated this into the mouthpiece. "Understand that the occupants are not under arrest—I'd just like to speak to them. But *find them*."

"In the meantime," he declared, turning to Jerome, "I'm going out to see what can be found in that shed.

And you're coming with me, to show me this window that's so easy to force. And, while we're on our way, you can explain how you come to know about it."

As the police car sped towards the fruit farm Jerome described the practical joke which had left him locked in the shed, and how he had escaped. At the farm, he demonstrated how easily he had opened the window again from the outside.

"Mm.m. Any luck, Gage?" he said to the fingerprint man.

"Not much, I'm afraid, sir. There's one main lot of prints all over evrything—that's Mathewson. Then there's another one, here and there, fairly recent."

"You'd better take my fingerprints for comparison," Jerome said. "I crawled around in there clutching at things about a fortnight ago."

The second set of prints turned out to be his. Doulton said ferociously, "She must have made a slip-up somewhere. She *must* have." He marched outside and stood looking at the window. "Let's see. She brings this pair of steps and sets them here. She's already opened the window. She climbs in. What would she be wearing, Aylwin?"

"If she'd driven over from the gliding club and especially on a cold early spring day, she'd be wearing slacks and a duffel coat."

"Right. Let's see if she's left any threads of cloth or fluff on the rough wood." They had no success. "Oh well. . . . She steps down. What does she step down on to?"

The answer was a metal drum containing tar oil wash. At one time there might possibly have been a footprint of hers on its surface, but Jerome's escape efforts of a fortnight ago had eradicated it. The inspector fixed a stare of tired reproach on him when he confessed to this. Then he sighed and went on with his reconstruction.

"Let's see, what does she do next? She's still got her gloves on. She picks up the can of D.N.O.C. and puts it out of the window. Then she climbs out again. She tips it—the D.N.O.C.—into the tank of the spraying apparatus standing outside."

"Getting her clothes stained bright yellow in the process," ventured Jerome.

"Huh? Oh Lor', yes. She wouldn't risk that. So then—let's see—" he went back inside the shed, avoiding the fingerprint man kneeling on the floor.

On the inside of the door an old flying suit was hanging, stained and discoloured with chemicals. A leather flying helmet was tucked into one of the pockets together with a pair of goggles such as motor-cyclists wear.

"This was Lucas Mathewson's protective clothing, which he'd have worn had he known he was spraying with a poisonous chemical," mused the inspector. "So as like as not she borrowed this, and slipped it on over her own clothes."

"Not over a duffel coat," Jerome objected. "No, she'd take that off, and probably her gloves too—there'd be no harm in that since she was handling cloth by then, which would show no prints. But then she'd need gloves in case the stuff spattered on to her hands and dyed the skin yellow. Oh, wait a bit, here's a pair of rubber gloves in the back pocket of the flying suit."

Doulton took them and stood silent, visualising the scene outside the hut as Susan put these clothes on over her own. Jerome held the old flying helmet in his hands. He turned it this way and that. Then he stopped short.

"Look at this," he said.

Inside, on the lining, medium brown hairs were caught—only a few, but enough to show they were Lucas's.

Among them was one short stark black hair.

"That's hers, I'll lay you any money!" cried Doulton.

He held out his hand for the helmet. Jerome surrendered it, his glance going to what the detective held in his other hand.

"And—inspector—on the inside rubber surface of the gloves—wouldn't there be fingerprints?"

They waited in a shouting silence while Gage lovingly turned the gloves inside out and carried out his tests. He looked up, his eyes shining with pride. "A different set from either of the other two. Not very clear, but I'll be able to bring them up."

"Right. We'll get some of hers for comparison but there's hardly a doubt. . . ." Doulton was now purring like a sombre tiger satisfied after a long hunt. He continued his examination of the shed but it yielded nothing more. Even so, they had not done so badly. "We'll soon have her now," Doulton declared.

But he was wrong. Soon after ten that evening he had her car, but he did not have Susan Denver.

The car was stopped by a London policeman as it turned sedately into Baker Street. But the driver was Bryan Mathewson, and he was alone.

When asked by the police what had happened to Mrs. Denver, he replied that she had asked him to drive her car to her London flat and wait for her there. No, he didn't know where she had gone. Yes, he had left her in Beckenton, outside the hospital. Told that the hall porter at the hospital said they had both been in the car when it drove off, he shook his head and regretted the hall porter had made a mistake.

He had the key of Susan's flat. He insisted he expected her that night. He and a detective sat waiting for some hours, but Susan did not come. About two o'clock in the morning he accepted a pressing invitation to return to Beckenton and see Inspector Doulton.

Doulton made him go over his story again. It didn't

vary. Susan had said to him outside the hospital, "You drive home and wait for me there, darling. Here's the key. I shan't be long." He had obeyed his instructions. He knew nothing more.

"But why did she ask you to do such an odd thing?"

"I've no idea."

"Didn't you ask?"

"No, why should I?"

"You didn't think it strange to be driving back to London in Mrs. Denver's car while Mrs. Denver stayed in Beckenton?"

"Not a bit."

Jerome, who had been a silent witness to all this, nodded agreement when Doulton gave him a glance of frustrated irritation. Sensing that a little help wouldn't be unwelcome, he said, "This isn't a game, you know, Bryan. They'll throw the book at you for this."

"But I only drove her car back to London for her. That isn't a crime."

"Don't play the fool. She killed her husband and you helped cover up for her by concealing the weapon. You're aiding and abetting a criminal."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he replied firmly. "I don't know what weapon you can possibly mean. If Susan was responsible for her husband's death, why haven't you arrested her?"

"We will," Doulton said grimly, "don't you fret."

"Have you any idea why she's decided to run away now?" Jerome said suddenly. "As you yourself said, the police would have arrested her before this if they had evidence."

"Steady on there," breathed the inspector.

Jerome disregarded him. "Have you thought why she's made a break for it *now*—at this precise moment?"

"She hasn't 'made a break for it,'" Bryan objected.

"She has a perfect right to go where she likes."

"Do you know where she is? Because if you do, you'd better say. Do you know why she's wanted? On suspicion of murdering your brother Lucas."

"Lucas isn't dead!" Bryan retorted loudly. "And he's suffering from heat-stroke!"

There was a silence in the stuffy room. Then Doulton said, not unkindly, "Your brother died at about the time your car was stopped in London, Mathewson."

"Died?" He shrank back in his chair. "Lucas is dead? But—but—It's not true, it can't be."

"He died with Barbara Haskell sitting by the bed talking to him, although the doctors assured her he couldn't hear her. You should have been there, Bryan, shouldn't you? But you were creating a diversion so that his murderer could escape."

"It was heat-stroke!" he shouted. "The doctors told me it was heat-stroke."

"Brought on by an accumulated dose of poisonous chemical spray, put into the tank of his spraying apparatus without his knowledge. And who put the poison there so that he could kill himself without realizing it?"

Bryan sat staring at Jerome. He seemed hypnotised. "Who?" he whispered.

"We think it was Susan Denver."

Bryan shook his head from side to side like an animal plagued by an insect. "That's nonsense! Utter nonsense! Susan liked Lucas. She wouldn't have harmed him. Why should she?"

"You mean you didn't know?"

"Know? Know what?"

"That Lucas helped her in her plan to get rid of her husband?"

"That's not true!" Bryan shouted. "I was the only—"

He broke off, actually biting his lips to keep back the words.

"You were the only one who helped her? Is that what you were going to say?"

Bryan had recovered some of his self-control. He said haughtily, "Don't try to trap me by putting words into my mouth."

"No, don't," echoed Doulton uneasily.

"That be damned," Jerome said savagely. "I'm not a policeman and I'll say what I like, unless you throw me out. This poor deluded halfwit doesn't know what kind of thing he's mixed up in. He thinks Susan Denver was driven to murder her husband for all sorts of selfless, high-salutin' principles, and that he's justified in helping her. Let me tell you, Bryan Mathewson, she probably killed her husband because he bored her and couldn't earn enough money to give her the life she wanted. She planned to kill him with only the minimum of help from anyone. All she needed was to keep people away from the launching point. Why was it, do you recall, that no-one except herself and the signaller went out on the field?"

"Lucas—Lucas was doing card tricks."

"Exactly. He told us, before he died, that she asked him to do that. She said he would have Barbara all to himself. So without asking her what she intended to do, he carried out his side of the bargain. But she—what did she do?"

"I don't know—you're only imagining all this—"

"I'm not imagining it. Lucas is dead. She killed him. That was her way of keeping her side of the bargain. He got Barbara, didn't he?—by his bedside while he died."

"Don't, don't!" begged Bryan. "I can't bear it! You're just making it up! It's a pack of lies!"

"Ask Inspector Doulton, then. He heard Lucas beg me

to see that she paid for what she had done to him. I'm going to do it, too. I helped the police find evidence that she had broken into Lucas's poison store and poured poisonous spray into the harmless mixture he was using. Did you really think your brother's death was an accident?"

"Yes," he mumbled, leaning forward, head bent and elbows on knees. "Yes, of course I did. I had no reason to think Lucas was involved in any way with Susan's plans. She told me I was the only one. She told me I was her—her guardian angel."

"Oh, my God!" Jerome said angrily. "Mathewson, you are the damnedest fool I ever came across. Tonight, when she suddenly made off, didn't it strike you as strange?"

"It did—a little—but of course the police have been asking questions about Denver's death and I thought—she said—it would only be a question of time, she said. I was to go back to London in her car and she would write to me."

"From where?"

"From Paris. That's where she's gone. I dropped her at the nearest station to catch the train for Dover. She crossed in the Night Ferry while you were still questioning me."

"She just went off—just like that?"

"Yes. She had a little case in the back of the car. In a way I suppose she's been half expecting trouble ever since the first time the police came to see her."

Doulton was already on the telephone asking for a check to be made at Dover. Jerome kept talking to Bryan in the way that had proved the most effective—a mixture of logic and righteous indignation. Now that he had started, Bryan seemed unable to stop. Susan's plan was to leave the country and stay out of sight in Paris. She relied

on Bryan, she said, to keep the police occupied while she was on her way. She would need money; he was to send it to this address, where she would call and collect it.

"What was the address?" Jerome demanded, and passed it to Doulton who repeated it into the phone.

All that day they waited for information from the Sureté. Susan hadn't been seen on the ferry, but that wasn't unexpected. There was no way of knowing how long it would be before she called at the address in the Rue d'Abelard in hopes of money from Bryan.

When the French police got in touch, it was only to add confusion. The address was a little boutique specialising in inexpensive dresses. The owner was quite at a loss to explain why Mrs. Denver—or anyone else—should imagine she would act *poste restante*. She stated with conviction that she knew no Mrs. Denver and wouldn't have accepted letters for her if she had.

"That's damned funny," mused Doulton. "It can only mean that she never intended to let Bryan catch up with her again. She gave him a false address to keep him happy while he created a diversion for her getaway. What a woman!"

"The more I hear about her," Jerome said nervously, "the more she frightens me. Don't you get the impression that she's thought of every eventuality? That she's planned this thing out in all ways - she'll do so-and-so if all goes well, but if anything goes wrong she'll do such-and-such. When you think of her preparedness—a bag with clothes and a passport in the back of the car in case she needed to make a dash for it!"

"What infuriates me," ground out the detective, "is that I had her there—right in my hand—at the hospital. And she got clean out of the country!"

Jerome had suddenly stumbled to his feet and clutched at Doulton's telephone.

"What's wrong with you?" cried Doulton.

"Just a minute. Hang on a minute. How do I get an outside number on this phone?"

"Ask the switchboard."

He asked the switchboard for Barbara Haskell's home number. It rang and rang.

"No answer," he groaned. "Oh, hell and damnation!"

"Who're you ringing, anyhow?"

"Barbara Haskell."

"Save your breath, then. She's still in Beckenton. At the Boyard Hotel. She's staying for the inquest on Lucas."

"Come on!" exclaimed Jerome and raced out into the street.

Barbara was on her way downstairs to dinner when Jerome burst into the hotel foyer. He grabbed her by the wrist and hauled her into a corner.

"Listen," he said rapidly. "The first evening we ever talked about Susan Denver—remember?"

"Why—yes—at my flat."

"You described what your relationship was with her during your trip to France in October."

"Yes, I remember that."

"You said—didn't you say this?—that you were in charge of the money and the passports, and you still had hers in your travel bag."

Barbara stared at him.

"Did you say that?"

"Yes, I did."

"And have you still got her passport?"

"So far as I know. It's probably still in that travel bag—in the trunk cupboard at home."

Doulton had listened to this hurried exchange with an expression of growing wonder. Then he gave a grunt of anger.

"A complete red herring! She can't have left for France at all."

"No, and unless she's gone to Ireland, which is the only place I can think of that needs no passport, she's still in this country."

TWENTY-ONE

DOULTON hurried off to change the direction of his manhunt. Barbara said, with concern in her voice, "Come and have something to eat, Jerome. You look worn out."

"You don't look so chipper yourself."

"No, it isn't much fun, is it? I used to think it would be terribly thrilling to be mixed up in a murder hunt, but I know different now."

Her father was already seated at their table in the hotel restaurant. He greeted Jerome with a friendly grin under which there was some constraint. He asked anxiously for news, but looked resigned when told that Jerome didn't feel free to say anything.

"One thing does rather worry me," he said in a pause between courses. "Of course I can't blame myself entirely, because I wasn't the only person taken in, but then that's no excuse."

"Excuse for what?" Jerome asked warily.

"Well, the fact is, Aylwin. . . . I gave Susan Denver some money."

"You did *what*?"

"Don't take that tone. I had no reason to suspect her of being an unsuitable person to--"

"When was this?"

"It was that weekend a fortnight ago, when we were staying at The Silent Woman. I had nothing against her, you must remember—quite the contrary. She seemed to me to have acted with the greatest propriety and good sense considering the kind of man her husband was. So naturally, finding myself in the same hotel with her, I talked to her—in the lounge and in the bar, and so on. She told me how she'd started the new restaurant with the

money she'd got from her husband's insurance, but things were a bit tight now—she'd used up all her ready cash. So I—"

"You gave her a cheque."

"Yes."

"For how much?"

"Not much, really. I mean, in the circumstances as I saw them then. I felt I owed her something for being so kind and understanding after that quarrel I had in public with her husband."

"How much?" Jerome said again.

"Well a thousand pounds. It was only to be a loan, really," he added hastily. "She said I should have it back out of the profits of either her restaurant or the Pteron."

"Excuse me," Jerome said, getting up. "I'll have to phone Doulton and tell him all this. We had no idea she was so well supplied with funds."

"But it wasn't ready money," protested Haskell. "She would just put the cheque into her bank."

"Yes, and draw it out again. Why else did she fish that money out of you, do you suppose? Because already she was planning ahead in case I should uncover something that made it necessary for her to get out."

It took some time to find out what she had done with the cheque. The next day, Friday, the manager of her bank rather reluctantly agreed that she had paid in a cheque for one thousand pounds and then drawn it out again in cash over the course of about a week.

"What do you bet it was money she had in that case in the back of her car?" asked Doulton. "Money, and not clothes and a passport."

"I'm still puzzled about what she intends to do," Jerome countered. "Granted she's well provided with money, but every policeman in this country is on the

lookout for her. And she's a very striking girl. She can't really imagine she'll get far."

"You'd be surprised," the detective said. "She can soon change her appearance. It's dead easy for a woman. Instead of being a chic young lady she changes over to being a terrible old frump. Flat shoes and a tweed skirt. Nothing to it."

"But where is she going to carry out this metamorphosis?"

"Oh, anywhere. If she had the clothes in that case, all she need do is go into a powder room or something, and come out changed."

A policeman came into Doulton's office and said in low tones, "Miss Barbara Haskell is asking to see Mr. Aylwin, sir."

"Show her in at once."

She came in, looking shy and girlish in a summer dress of blue silk. "Jerome, I wanted to tell you—about Susan's passport—"

"What? Don't tell me you've suddenly remembered that you gave it back to her after all?"

"No, not that. I've just remembered where it is. It's in my overnight bag, all right, but my overnight bag is at the gliding club."

"At the club?"

"Yes, in the women's dormie. And what's more, Susan will probably remember it's there. I've been thinking about it all night, and I remember now, when we got back from France and had parked the trailer against the hangar and everything, we came and slung our belongings in the dormie. And I said to Susan, 'Don't forget, your passport is in there along with mine.' And as far as I know, that's where it is still."

"The gliding club?" said Jerome, looking at Doulton. "The perfect hide-out. No-one goes there at this time of

year except at weekends. What's today? Friday? She's got until daybreak tomorrow morning to clear out with her passport and about a thousand pounds in cash."

"We're on our way," cried Doulton, making for the door.

It was seven miles from Beckenton to the Mollin Ridge Gliding Club premises. The huts, seen from the top of the ridge, looked shabby and deserted under the April sun.

"Do you think she's there, sir?" asked Sergeant Wандell.

"We have to catch up with her some time," his superior said firmly. "Put out a warning to all local patrol cars to stand by, will you? If she makes a break for it we want to be ready for once."

They turned into the lane. The huts were out of sight for the present.

"If she's there, now's the time for her to slip away." Jerome said uneasily.

"This lane's the only way out."

"She could go the way I imagine she'd come—across country."

"She wouldn't get far without transport."

There was no car parked on the tarmac and no sign of life. Already Jerome was beginning to think it was stupid to expect to find her here. She wouldn't come looking for her passport—why should she? She could bide her time in some quiet spot and then get out of the country in the summer on a no-passport trip to France.

Yet all the same, there was an undeniable advantage in having papers, especially abroad where the police sometimes choose to examine them. Cut off as she might be from any source of news since the night of Lucas's death, she might have no way of knowing as yet that her name, her passport, were best buried.

And the gliding club was a good hide-out. Miles away

from anywhere, no-one coming near from one week's end to the next. . . .

They left the police car. It was logical to start with the nearest hut, which was the Flying Instructors' Office and men's quarters. It was locked, firmly locked.

Then the club house. It too was locked.

"If she was here, would she have to climb in somewhere?" asked the inspector.

"She might. But—no, I don't think so. Her husband was a Flying Instructor—he probably had keys to at least some of the buildings."

They walked round the club house, to look in the windows. The sun was warm, a couple of honey bees were fussing about among the roses just coming out on Jane Osbertson's trellis.

At the kitchen window they stopped and stared in. There was nothing to be seen. The sun streamed in and illuminated the interior yet it was empty. They walked on.

And then Jerome turned and walked back.

"Doulton," he called softly.

"What is it?"

"She's been here."

"How do you know?"

"Look." He nodded towards the kitchen window.

As in most kitchens, the sink was directly below the window. Someone had recently run the tap in the sink. Beads of water were spattered all over its white porcelain surface. And in this warm sunlight it was impossible for them to remain there longer than fifteen minutes without evaporating.

"Somebody's been here, at any rate," Doulton said. "Right. Spread out. Aylwin, which is the women's hut?"

"The one beyond the hangar."

"Wandell, you take that. I'll take the hangar. You take

the one next to that, Aylwin. Cooper's on watch by the car and she won't get past him. Off we go."

He walked away briskly but soundlessly on rubber shod feet. But when he and his sergeant had reached their objectives they began to make as much noise as possible.

"Mrs. Denver! Mrs. Denver, are you in there?"

Doulton was hammering on the big sliding doors of the hangar. "Mrs. Denver, it would be better to come out and face the music. Do you hear me, Mrs. Denver?"

It was up to Jerome to do his share. He walked to the repair shed door, raised his fist, and thumped on the painted board which said "Strictly No Smoking."

"Susan, if you're in there, the game's up."

No answer. He tried the handle. The door was locked. With some half-formed notion of looking to see if the room was empty, he stopped and looked through the key-hole.

Then he straightened and said, softly, "You remembered to lock the door, Susan. But you shouldn't have left the key in the lock on the inside."

There was a soft movement inside. He guessed she had put her hand on the key, and then taken it away again.

"Come on out, Susan. It's all finished now."

Her voice came, soft and clear. "Let me off, Jerome. Walk away. Tell those other men the repair shed's empty."

"Don't be silly," he said angrily.

"It's not silly a bit. He trusts you, that policeman. He'll believe you."

"This is your last chance, Susan."

"I've got money here, Jerome. Quite a lot. If you go away and take the policemen with you, I'll leave some of it here in a parcel for you. You can walk in tomorrow and—"

He stepped back from the door and hailed Doulton. Doulton turned and came at the run. "Is she there?" he shouted.

He didn't stop when he arrived but hurled himself straight at the door, on the run. It didn't budge. He stepped quickly round Jerome and looked in through the window. Jerome followed him.

They could see her quite clearly. She was standing in the middle of the shed lighting a cigarette. She turned her head and looked at them, the match in her fingers.

She had exchanged her pretty clothes for a cheap satin blouse and a black rayon skirt cut just that little bit too tight. She had altered her smooth hair to a frizz of curls, and at her ears dangled hideous, heavy glass earrings. She had achieved a disguise without the slightest difficulty, a disguise no-one would look at twice. The streets of every town can produce a fair sample of women who look like that. The only trouble she might have had was in persuading men that she was not what she seemed.

It seemed to Jerome that she said something but he couldn't make out what. Her foot, which they couldn't see, appeared to kick at something. There was a thud as if a can or a tin had fallen over. She tossed away the lighted match.

Jerome put up his forearm and hit the glass of the window. The first blow didn't break it. "Quick, quick—that sign—on the door—'No Smoking'!"

But it was already too late. A sheet of flame soared up, curtaining off half of the room from their view. Everything inside was blue, orange and yellow fire. There was a sound of crackling and roaring as the window fell in and they could hear as well as see the flames.

Someone stumbled about in the room.

The flames reached the window. The men there staggered back. They turned together and drove at the door with all their might. It gave inwards. A flood of smoke and flames poured out.

Now someone was screaming.

"No you don't!" roared Doulton, hanging on to Jerome like grim death.

"But she's in there!"

"You'd never reach her. Keep still, you bloody young fool! It's by her own choice—!"

"But she didn't know what it would be like!" Jerome raged, struggling to be free. "Don't you understand? She's got no insight, she's too cold-blooded—"

And then it was too late—the place caved in. Burning spars of wood scattered over them, driving them back. The heat was unbearable. It was like the nightmare of the sparks scattered from the barbecue fire, but a million-fold intensified.

They were still edging towards the wreckage, seeking to find a way in, when the fire brigade came careering in. They had been summoned on the police car radio. The firemen took over. Their hoses played on the heap of blacked wood. Doulton took the captain aside and spoke to him in an undertone. As the jets of water played on the ruins, some fine rectangular pieces of burnt flaky paper began to lift into the breeze.

One settled by Jerome's foot. He rubbed his smoke-filled eyes and squatted to examine it. It was the flinders of a five pound note.

Others rose as the firemen disturbed the wreckage. They floated for a short time in the air above the burnt hut, and then drifted off to settle, in useless ash, on the withered grass of the nearby airfield.

They seemed a fitting illustration for this particular funeral pyre.